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THE BREWING STORM

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BASED ON THE HIT TV SERIES
CREATED BY CONSTANCE M. BURGE

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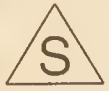

Piper stared at the gun the demon was holding on her, wondering if she could blow it up without letting the demon take her power and use it against her. She ultimately decided that a bullet would do less damage than an explosion.

"Look, witch," the demon said. "I don't care about you. Just let me have the Earthshaker and you can go on your merry way."

"I think we both know that's not going to happen," Piper replied, shifting her body so she was in front of Muriel. If she had to, she could try to freeze time if the gun was fired. Maybe if she just tried to freeze the bullet and not the demon she wouldn't have her power reflected back. Of course, the idea of freezing a bullet heading at her at the speed of, well, a speeding bullet, was no easy task. Then again, it was better than the other option: death.

Charmed®

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The Brewing Storm

Published by Simon & Schuster

THE BREWING STORM

An original novel by Paul Ruditis

Based on the hit TV series created by

Constance M. Burge

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Michelle & Hanna

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Prologue

It was a dark and stormy midafternoon.

In fact, it was much darker and far stormier than it should have been for San Francisco in early fall. For days the weather had been unseasonable to say the least. The five-day forecast had looked like an encyclopedia of climatic terminology and every day brought new weather anomalies that couldn't have been predicted.

It started harmlessly enough on Monday with the typical morning fog, which spread over the entire city and stayed all day in spite of the wild winds blowing out of town. Tuesday brought searing heat and humidity, yet somehow managed to drop below freezing by nightfall. Wednesday saw more wind, with the addition of hail that pelted the area and covered the ground six inches deep. People were still shoveling out from under the ice on Thursday when snow came down on top of it.

Conveniently, it all cleared away on its own with another intense burst of heat in the afternoon that sent the humidity soaring back up.

By the time Christopher Young found himself speeding over the city's rain-slicked streets Friday afternoon, the day had already been a mixture of all the previous days' weather, with a few very minor earthquakes thrown in for fun.

Being a meteorologist, Christopher knew that the strange confluence of events was unparalleled in recorded weather history. Nothing he had learned back in school could have prepared him for the strange climatic changes that were happening over the city and slowly spreading to the rest of the world. He did his best every night during his weather reports to reassure the populace that everything would be fine by Sunday, when he promised sunshine and happiness for all.

What he had failed to tell his audience was that the strange weather *had* happened before in *unrecorded* weather history. The reason for the wacky weather on this and all those past occasions had little to do with the jet stream influence, El Niño, or a butterfly flapping its wings deep in the heart of the Congo. It did, however, have a little something to do with the reason a car full of demons was chasing him through the streets of the city.

Christopher swung his car off Lincoln Boulevard and into the Fort Point parking lot so quickly that the back wheels hydroplaned on the

wet road. He was able to right the car and get it into the lot with only minimal damage to the passenger side door as he scraped past the gate.

The demons had been impossible to shake on the road. However, Christopher suspected that heading out on foot wasn't going to be any better. He hoped that he'd have an advantage out in the elements, or at least that the demons would have a disadvantage tracking him. Fleeing to the safety of his own home was not an option, because that was exactly what they wanted him to do, and the police weren't really much help when demons were involved.

He pumped his brakes and finally came to a safe stop straddling a couple of parking spots. There were only a few cars in the lot. Before he turned off the engine, he saw that the clock on the dashboard showed it was just after four. He was supposed to be on the air in an hour giving the latest update on the weather that had been plaguing the city.

Somehow he didn't think he was going to make that broadcast.

Christopher dashed out of his car, making sure to grab his cell phone as he went for the path to the Golden Gate Bridge. At the same time, the demons came to a screeching halt behind him. For a brief moment Christopher wondered where the demons had gotten a car from in the first place, but figured that simple theft was nothing compared to attempted murder. He hit

the speed dial on his cell phone for the third time in the chase.

After hearing the outgoing voicemail message, Christopher yelled into the phone as he continued to run with rain pelting him. "It's me again. I can't shake these guys and I can't let them get me. Congratulations, you're in charge now. I sent you a copy of the files this morning. Find the kid first. He's your best chance—"

Christopher slipped on a patch of mud and dropped the phone. His eyes didn't even follow as it skittered off toward a gutter. He could hear the demons getting closer and realized he had just been fooling himself when he pulled into the lot thinking he would lose them.

The rain abruptly stopped as he reached the bridge footpath, and the sun was already bursting through the clouds in points. The sudden change in the weather wasn't much of a surprise considering all that had been going on so far in the week. Christopher took it as a sign that he was doing the right thing. It only made sense that the sun would be shining down and warming his body at that particular moment.

Christopher made it a quarter of the way across the bridge before he saw the group of tourists shaking out their closed umbrellas in the path ahead of him. He stopped immediately, knowing that he would never make it all the way across the bridge without putting their innocent lives in danger.

He briefly considered using his powers against the demons, but knew that would be playing right into their hands. An indirect attack could backfire with all the people around, especially considering that his intense fear would probably mess with his control. Christopher was out of options, but took solace in the fact that they had the kid to fall back on.

The demons weren't as close as he originally thought, but they were certainly closing in. They were big, scary, human-looking demons, built more for battle than for speed. One rather formidable woman led three hulking men toward him. They weren't running so much as walking quickly, and Christopher couldn't help but wonder why the bad guys never seemed to run, as if speed walking was somehow more menacing. He wished he was going to have time to figure that little mystery out.

He wished he had more time to do a lot of things.

Christopher considered flagging down a car, but figured even if a driver was going to be kind enough to give the sweating, panting, slightly rain-soaked man with crazed fear in his eyes a ride, that same driver would probably not stop in the middle of the bridge to do so. It wouldn't help in the long run anyway. He knew there was only one way out of this.

At least he had the chance to choose how he died.

As quickly as he could, Christopher swung himself over the guardrail as the tourists looked on and cars started to slow. The morbid thought that he would still be on the news that night passed briefly through his mind. But it was tomorrow night that concerned him more. He had been so busy evading the demons all week that things were horribly behind schedule. Only one of the others knew what was going on, and she was out of town at the moment. He wasn't even sure that the kid was a possible replacement for him.

As the female demon reached out to grab him, Christopher could only hope that there would still be enough time for the others to do what they had to do, and he let go of the rail.

He could feel the sun on his body as he fell. The warm air currents were slowing his fall unnaturally, but not enough so that it would make a difference. As he took his slow-motion dive, he thought he heard one of the demons say, "It's okay. We know where he lived," but hoped it was just his mind playing tricks on him. Their voices certainly couldn't carry down to the water with him . . . he hoped. Or else this course of action was the *wrong* choice.

Unfortunately, the air currents weren't slowing him enough so he could do anything to change it.

Christopher burst into flames a half second before he hit the water.

Chapter 1

A beam of sunlight streamed through the frost on the kitchen window of Halliwell Manor and fell perfectly onto the notepad beside the stove. With a pencil in one hand, Piper Halliwell was adding ingredients to the list from memory. Her other hand was busy slowly stirring a steaming pot in a counter-clockwise direction with a long wooden spoon. She put a check mark next to each item on the list as she confirmed the ingredients carefully laid out before her in a precise fashion. There was little room for error—everything had to be measured out exactly and added in the proper timeframe. The steam rising from the pot had a pleasant aroma, a sign she was on the right track.

"Hey there," her half-sister Paige Matthews said as she came into the kitchen and took in the scene. "Potion?"

"Potatoes," Piper replied as she picked up the

cutting board and slid the precisely sliced spuds into the pot. "I'm making my formerly famous Mulligatawny stew."

"For breakfast?" Paige asked as she joined her sister by the pot and took a deep breath, inhaling the aroma of the potatoes.

"Actually, it's dinner," Piper replied as she double-checked her list and searched the counter for the next ingredient with no success. "Can you take this?" she asked as she handed the spoon to Paige, who took it.

"Dinner is like ten hours away," Paige said, poking at the stew.

"Stir it slowly, clockwise," Piper replied as she turned toward the cabinets and started exploring. It was much easier than usual since the cabinets were already open; two of the doors had recently been smashed to pieces, and Leo hadn't had a chance to replace them yet. "It takes three hours to make. After all the ingredients are added, I'm going to start working on the main course while it simmers."

"Wow, what's the occasion?"

"Leo," Piper said, a little too loudly.

"Don't tell me I forgot his birthday," Paige said, squinting her eyes as she searched her memory. "I guess he could always use another plaid shirt."

"It's not his birthday," Piper said, ignoring her sister's comment about her husband's usual choice of apparel. "I was just calling him."

"Yes, darling," Leo said in a forced pleasant tone as he entered the kitchen.

Piper knew that she was on the verge of trying his patience—actually, she suspected that she had already crossed that line a few minutes ago—but she couldn't worry about that right now. When she got into full-on cooking mode it tended to occupy her mind one hundred percent. It had been a while since she had gotten into it this deeply, but that's what the day was supposed to be about. She had even taken the night off from work so she could enjoy the meal she'd be taking all day to prepare.

That was one of the perks of owning her own club. She was able to take off whenever she wanted, even though Saturday was typically the busiest night of the week. She also liked the fact that she got to see the hottest bands for free, as P3 was turning into quite the little hot spot. The club's success was one of the reasons she needed to take the day off, since with her other responsibilities she hadn't scheduled any time for herself in what seemed like forever.

"I need you to go over to the store again and pick up some pistachios . . . shelled if they have them . . . please?"

"Are you sure that's all that you need," Leo asked, and quickly added, "sweetheart? Maybe you could go online and check out the recipe there."

Piper tried very hard not to blow up at him, or blow him up, for that matter.

Some people just don't understand the need for a chef to use her own recipes, she tried to convince herself to remain calm. The question really hadn't been entirely out of line.

Granted, she hadn't formally been a chef for a few years, but the cooking gene never went away . . . she hoped. "Is it my fault all my recipe files blew up in the last demon attack?" Piper asked, expecting that her husband knew the question was rhetorical. "I need to add the pistachios before I can drop in the almonds. It's all very specific."

"Why?" Paige asked.

But Piper ignored her sister, even though she knew the question came out of curiosity, not sarcasm. "Now go. Quick like a bunny." She clapped her hands together for emphasis as the phone rang.

Leo knew better than to argue, and orbed out without another word.

"Not again," Piper said as she picked up the cordless hanging on the wall. She took a breath and calmed herself. "What now?"

Paige continued slowly stirring as she watched her sister get more and more agitated.

"I don't know," she said into the phone with exasperation. "Call me crazy, but if the electrician says he can't make it until four o'clock, maybe you should call another electrician."

"Wow, I thought cooking was supposed to calm people," Paige said as Piper abruptly hung up the phone and took the spoon back.

"I used to love to cook," Piper said. "Hated working for a prissy restaurant manager, but loved the cooking part. Now I hardly have any time to make anything aside from anti-demon potions. And now that my recipes are gone—"

"You figured it was time to start up again—"

"Trying to recreate the recipes from memory," Piper said. "But guess what? My memories just aren't what they used to be. Wonder why. My body's only been taken over by other beings how many times?"

Piper actually stopped to think about that for a moment. Considering the high number of entities always trying to control them or kill them, Piper was actually surprised that she was able to take any time off to cook at all.

Then the phone rang again.

Oh, I'm sorry, she thought. *What time off?*

Paige started to move toward the cordless.

"Leave it," Piper said. "It's been ringing all morning."

"I know, I heard it up in the attic," Paige said. "What's going on?"

As if for emphasis, the phone rang again.

"The storm knocked out the electricity at P3 last night in the middle of the band's set," Piper explained. "There was some kind of power surge that blew out one of the amps, which the

band is insisting we pay to replace. Somehow they don't understand the concept behind the 'act of God' clause in their contract with us. There's also some water damage to the storeroom, which I hope we can ignore for a little while because I don't really have time to deal with it right now. I specifically planned to do nothing but cook today, but it looks like I'm going to have to go in."

Phoebe entered the kitchen as the phone rang for the third time. "Are we not answering that for some particular reason?"

"Yes," Piper said. "But please don't make me go through it again."

"Aren't you a little overdressed for a Saturday?" Paige asked Phoebe.

Piper checked out her sister's very smart black jacket. Of course she had to add the "Phoebe touch" by wearing it over a red silk camisole and a short skirt with a slit going up maybe a little too high on the thigh.

"Have to go in to discuss my contract," Phoebe said.

"Wait," Piper said, trying to wrap her mind around what her sister had just said. "You've been working all this time without a contract?"

"No, I had a kind of . . . probationary thing," Phoebe replied. "And now that my column seems to be taking off, Elise thought we should renegotiate that into a formal contract to address some of the things I've been doing in addition to

writing. You know . . . public appearances, interviews. We're even talking about doing some endorsements. I'm thinking maybe I should get an agent . . . and a business manager."

"Wow, aren't we just the movers and shakers," Paige said. "I feel like such a sloth."

"Hey," Piper said, throwing her arm around her sister. "You do important work at the center. You know that."

"I know," Paige said. "I just think there's got to be something else out there for me. Besides, I've really been so focused on magic lately that it seems like my attention's been split."

"Speaking of which," Phoebe said as she grabbed a breakfast bar from the cabinet, "find anything on that weird weather stuff yet? The storm kept me up half the night. On the bright side, I did have time to go over my contract. Good thing, too. The lawyers tried to slip in some 'morals clause' that actually said that as their representative, my behavior outside the office had some kind of bearing on the 'Ask Phoebe' persona I had created, and I would have to conduct myself responsibly or suffer some kind of legal consequences that I don't actually understand."

Piper took a taste of her stew and sprinkled in another dash of curry. Her mind flashed back to her late sister Prue. The more Phoebe got into her job, the more she sounded like the career-driven, ever-efficient, eldest Halliwell—although Piper

was sure Prue would have understood every legal consequence of a contract.

"And it seems like just yesterday you were ditching chemistry to make out with Josh Login."

"Oh, but we had some chemistry of our own!" Phoebe sighed. "Anybody know when I became a responsible adult?" She took a bite of her breakfast bar.

"It's the kind of thing that just sorta sneaks up on you," Paige answered.

"I thought responsible adults ate a proper breakfast," Piper said with a sly smile.

"They do when they have the time," Phoebe replied as she made her way out of the kitchen. "Call if you find anything!"

Inspector Darryl Morris checked his watch one last time as he burst through the double doors into the police station. He was only two minutes late, but any amount of tardiness still bothered him. All his life he had been one of those people that naturally tended to run at least fifteen minutes early for everything. That had changed a bit as he got older, particularly following the birth of his son. Children had a way of unintentionally readjusting their parents' schedules, and Darryl Junior was the reason his dad was late for work today.

The original plan had been to drop Darryl Junior off with his grandparents Friday night so

that Darryl Senior and his lovely wife, Sheila, could have a romantic weekend (mostly) to themselves. The only problem was that a massive storm had hit the previous night, scaring the boy so much that he refused to leave the house even though his dad assured him that he would be safe in the car. Darryl couldn't blame his son, though. At times the intensity of the lightning and thunder had even scared him, but since it's not usually reassuring to know that anything scares your dad, Darryl had kept that part secret. That's why he found himself taking a detour on the way to work that morning, the last day of his six-day shift.

Darryl slid into his chair and surveyed the neatly organized stacks of paperwork surrounding him. He wasn't usually the type to let work get backed up like this, but in recent years his reports had begun taking longer and longer to prepare since so much of the paperwork had to be fabricated. That was another thing Darryl didn't use to do—lie with such ease to so many people. But he knew he could never reveal the truth behind many of the cases he worked on. Too many lives depended on that.

It wasn't that Darryl liked lying in his official paperwork; he just had no choice in the matter. Aside from the potential for saving lives by distorting the truth, the real story was usually too extraordinary to believe. Witches, demons, and magic were still largely in the closet in fairly liberal San Francisco, which is

why it was always so difficult trying to come up with an explanation for the growing list of suspects that simply disappeared from the face of the earth.

Take last week's suspected murderer/drug dealer for example. His superiors had believed that it was a simple case of a dealer taking out some of his clientele. In truth, the perp was a demon selling a mystical concoction from India that, besides killing the user, drained the body of the seven chakras. Darryl not only had to figure out an explanation for the mysterious drug that bore only a passing resemblance to heroin, but he had to work around the fact that Piper Halliwell blew up the suspect after he took out half her kitchen.

Normally, Darryl would have left the Charmed Ones out of the report entirely, but a suspicious neighbor called the cops when she heard explosions coming from Halliwell Manor for what certainly wasn't the first time. The demon was gone by the time Darryl's backup got there, but witnesses thought they had seen a "man" fitting his description entering the house.

Darryl gave the report one last review before presenting it to the chief. It was more than just dotting the "i"s and crossing the "t"s. Any little mistake could land him in trouble and risk exposing his friends, who just happened to be witches. Darryl was finally beginning to accept the fact that the mystical mayhem was a reality,

but he would certainly never get used to it or the part he played in it all.

"Hey, Inspector," Detective Warrington called to Darryl from her desk across the room. "What's with this freaky weather? Doesn't have anything to do with a case you're working on, does it?"

Darryl simply smiled and shook his head. He didn't have an active case at the moment, but that wasn't the point of the joke. Around the office, Darryl was getting quite the reputation for his involvement in weird—some might say "paranormal"—cases, which made his reports all the more difficult to write.

"Yeah, Morris," her partner, Detective Simpson, added. "Is there some Oogidy-Boogidy making all this rain?"

"Is Zeus throwing around all this lighting?" Warrington asked.

"Is Jack Frost nipping at your nose?" Simpson added as the duo cracked themselves up.

"Very funny," Darryl said, though he was thoroughly *un*amused, and quietly surprised that Warrington knew Zeus was the Greek God credited with using lightning to make a point.

"We've got one here for you," Simpson added. "Happened yesterday afternoon. Seems we got a jumper off the Golden Gate. Hey, now that I think of it, he was a *weatherman* on the local news."

"Nothing new about a jumper," Darryl replied as he got up to deliver his report to the chief.

"True," Warrington added. "But according to witnesses, this one exploded in a ball of fire right before he hit the water."

Darryl tried to cover his reaction as he continued to the chief's office. He didn't want to feed into his reputation by acting too interested in the odd situation.

"Sounds like he just needed to cool off," Darryl said as he knocked on the chief's door and stepped inside.

"Mornin', Morris," the chief greeted Darryl as he sipped his coffee.

"Morning," Darryl replied. "I have my report on those drug murders." He dropped the file on the desk and remained standing.

"Another missing suspect?" the chief inquired. "I don't like the fact that we're losing more and more criminals lately."

"Yeah, but at least the crimes always stop too," Darryl said weakly.

"Still don't like unanswered questions," the chief replied.

Neither do I, Darryl thought. He also knew he couldn't do anything that would let the chief, or anyone else, find those answers.

"Warrington and Simpson were just telling me about that case they're working on," Darryl said. "Sounds like they might need some help."

"I think they can handle a jumper," the chief said.

"Yeah, but a local celeb," Darryl said. "You

know they aren't the best at handling the press."

"They need the practice," the chief admitted, but implied that this would be the case they would get that practice on.

"It sounds kind of odd," Darryl replied, still searching for a way to insert himself into the investigation. "Don't you think?"

"No odder than the stuff you've been getting into lately," the chief said. There wasn't any accusation in his voice. Darryl knew the chief had been on the force for years and had seen many strange things in that time. San Francisco wasn't one of the most conservative cities to begin with. Of course, he also knew the chief was only going to turn a blind eye for so long.

"I've got something else for you," the chief said as he handed Darryl a note. "Call just came in on a missing kid. Seems pretty normal . . . at least as normal as any sicko who would take a kid."

"I'll get right on it," Darryl said as he turned and left the chief's office. As much as he hated working kidnapping cases, he was actually looking forward to a normal case for once, dealing with normal police work, normal suspects, and normal leads.

The problem was that he couldn't get his mind off the *ab*normal case he had just heard about. As he walked through the station he made a mental note to check in with the Charmed Ones about the exploding jumper.

Chapter 2

"We thought we'd let him sleep in," Mrs. Michaels said between sobs. "None of us have been getting much sleep lately since things have been so hectic, what with finalizing the adoption and . . ." The woman trailed off in tears as she leaned into her husband's shoulder.

Mr. Michaels held his wife tightly, whispering something that Darryl couldn't hear.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Michaels sniffed as she tried to compose herself.

The apology was completely unnecessary.

Darryl focused on the photo of the eleven-year-old boy, giving the woman a moment to compose herself. The smiling face in the picture showed a happy kid without a care in the world. However, Darryl had seen enough of these cases to know that frozen images like these rarely told the whole story. He didn't have anything on the

missing kid yet, so the case could go either way, and runaways had slightly better odds than kidnap victims.

Stephen and Maria Michaels hadn't even known their child for a full year. He had only just officially become their son earlier in the week, and they were moved beyond words by his disappearance. The vibe Darryl was getting was that the parents weren't involved in any foul play, as the saying goes. Unfortunately, in these situations it was the parents who got the first pass as possible suspects.

Darryl hated that part of the process—examining everything the parents said and did. He couldn't imagine how he would behave if he ever walked into his son's room to find the boy missing. He didn't *want* to imagine it, either.

"Mrs. Michaels," Darryl said.

"Maria, please," she replied as she gathered herself together.

"When did you finally check on him?" Darryl continued to gently prod for answers.

"About a minute before we called the police," Maria replied, her hands had reached for the nearest throw pillow and were twisting it at the edges.

"Shortly after nine," Stephen added softly.

"I could just tell something was wrong," his wife continued. "The bed was a mess . . . there were things strewn all over his desk. He's been

trying so hard to be good throughout the whole adoption. I think he was afraid we would give him back if his room was ever dirty." A sad smile flickered across her face, but was gone immediately.

"His window was wide open," Stephen continued for his wife. "I know we shut it because of the storm last night."

Darryl had already been up to the boy's bedroom for a quick glance. There wasn't any water on the floor and the curtains were dry, which implied that the possible kidnapping didn't happen until after the storm had subsided. Crime scene analysts were going over the place with a fine-toothed comb, but he had seen no sign of forced entry. The house was one of the older Victorians and didn't have any screens in the windows. If it hadn't been locked, there really wasn't anything stopping someone outside from simply sliding it open, in spite of the fact that it was on the second floor.

A conveniently—or inconveniently, depending on your view of the situation—placed tree branch was only a short jump from the window. Darryl couldn't imagine someone carrying the boy out the window, but it was possible the kidnapper forced him to make the jump to the tree. Either way, Darryl suspected the tree would be removed once the family's lives got back to normal.

In these cases, he always tried to think positively.

Darryl was preparing himself to ask the next set of difficult questions when he heard someone clearing her throat behind him. He turned to see Officer McGee standing in the foyer.

"Excuse me for a minute," Darryl said quietly as he got off the couch and went to join the officer.

"Sorry to interrupt," McGee said in a tone that matched the silence in the house. Everyone was speaking in hushed voices as if it were a library . . . or a morgue. "But I think you're needed outside."

There was something about McGee's strained tone and stiffened body language that set Darryl immediately on alert. He gave a glance back to Mr. and Mrs. Michaels and threw in a silent look of apology before he stepped outside onto the front patio. He immediately saw why McGee had been so tense.

A pair of dark sedans was parked on the opposite side of the street. The cars so obviously belonged to the FBI that Darryl was surprised he didn't see the initials emblazoned in white on the hoods. One man sat behind the wheel of the first car looking up at the house, while another pair of agents sat in the second car. The lead investigator was making his way up the steps to the patio.

"I certainly hope the SFPD didn't contaminate my crime scene," the Fed said as he approached Darryl with a sneer on his face that made McGee's body tense up even further, if that was possible.

"And I hope you Feds don't go blowin' the leads I've collected so far," Darryl said back.

"You mean based on those rookie questions you've probably been askin'?" the Fed shot back as the two men stared each other down.

Darryl was the first to crack a smile. "How ya' doin', Sammo?"

"Doin' fine, Dar," the Fed replied as he shared a smile and held out his hand.

Darryl had worked with Agent Sam Harkins on several, mostly successful, missing person cases in the past. He respected the man's abilities and always got the same back from the Fed. It wasn't a surprise that Harkins had showed up; Darryl had expected company when he first got the note from the chief.

Darryl saw McGee relax her posture slightly. He never understood why some officers always got tense when the FBI showed up to take the reigns of an investigation. He figured some officers were just territorial about their work. As far as Darryl was concerned, the more people they had out there trying to find the boy, the better.

"So, tell me you've got the case wrapped up for me," Harkins said with just a slight twinge of hope in his voice.

"Sorry, man. Just started to interview the parents," he replied. "You planning on taking over right now?"

"Since you've already built the relationship, why don't I sit in," Harkins said. The agent

never was one of those bureaucrats who came in claiming jurisdiction and kicking out the local police, which was probably why most of the times he and Darryl worked together had been successful.

"Do you have a read on the situation yet?" Harkins asked. "Gut feeling?"

"Too early," Darryl replied. "I was just getting to the fun part," he added sarcastically.

"Shall we?" Harkins pointed toward the open door.

Darryl nodded to McGee to stay out on the patio while he led Harkins into the house and briefed the agent on the little he knew so far. When they reached the living room they found Mrs. Michaels still sitting on the couch digging her nails into the throw pillow, already wearing a hole in the chenille. Mr. Michaels had moved over to his desk, where he seemed to be contemplating whether to smoke a cigarette. The open pack was in his hand, but he hadn't pulled one out yet.

"Sorry," he said, putting the pack down. "I've been trying to quit. This is my emergency pack. Figured this is an emergency." But he walked away from the cigarettes and joined his wife back on the couch.

"Mr. and Mrs. Michaels, this is Federal Agent Sam Harkins," Darryl said, introducing the new player. "He and his team will be taking over the investigation."

"Taking over?" Maria asked, shooting a fearful look at Darryl.

"Don't worry, ma'am," Harkins said as he shook Mr. Michaels's hand. "Darryl's not going anywhere. We'll be working together."

"Do we really need the FBI?" Stephen asked, more out of fear of the implication of having the big guns come in than anything else. "Tyler can't be that far."

Darryl wasn't about to point out just how far their son's abductor could have taken him in the time since they found the empty bed. The possibility that he had crossed state lines is what triggered the FBI's involvement in the case.

"We prefer to get in as much help as we can as soon as possible," Darryl explained, making sure to give the parents a calming tone to latch onto.

It seemed to work, because Stephen took Harkins's hand when he offered it.

"I'm just going to sit in for the moment," Harkins said after shaking hands with Maria as well. "Let Darryl continue where he left off."

"Okay," Mr. Michaels replied, though his voice was kind of hollow.

The two investigators took the nearest seats.

"You mentioned that the adoption recently went through," Darryl said, carefully getting into subject matter that was always difficult to explore. He hated this part of his job, but prying into peoples' lives was a necessary evil when trying to solve a crime. "Had there been any

unusual difficulties with the adoption? Maybe with his birth parents?"

"So far as we know, they're out of the picture," Stephen replied. "Tyler's been shuttled around from foster home to foster home for years."

"There *was* some problem with the last home," Maria added. "The parents just suddenly disappeared."

Darryl exchanged a glance with Harkins. That was a route definitely worthy of pursuit, though Darryl couldn't help but think back to earlier in the morning when he was dealing with another kind of mysterious disappearance.

"What do you mean by 'disappeared'?" Harkins asked.

"We're not sure," Maria replied, ripping into the fabric of the pillow. "Tyler never wants to talk about it."

"Maybe you should talk to the social worker who put us together with Tyler," Stephen suggested. "I always got the feeling that she knew more about the situation but for whatever reason she wouldn't—or couldn't—tell us."

At the mention of the social worker, Darryl's intuition went on high alert. Since there were probably hundreds, if not thousands, of social workers in the city, the odds were slim that his suspicions would prove true. However, the idea that popped into his head probably had something to do with the fact that they had also referred to people mysteriously disappearing.

"You don't think this social worker might be involved somehow?" Harkins asked.

"Oh, heavens no," Maria said. "She's done everything in her power to make sure the adoption went smoothly. And her sisters have been wonderful to us as well."

Darryl didn't need to ask the obvious next question, but he knew he had to, because Harkins was expecting it. "Can you tell us the social worker's name?"

"Sure," Mr. Michaels replied as he got up and walked back over to his desk, avoiding the cigarettes entirely. "Her name is Paige Matthews. I have her contact information right here."

Darryl took the slip of paper that Mr. Michaels offered. He glanced at it for a moment, even though he already knew what it said, then passed it off to Agent Harkins.

Phoebe pulled her car into her assigned parking spot in a nice warm patch of sunshine, but stayed behind the wheel. She couldn't help but notice that a dense fog covered the entire office building but didn't even extend to the parking lot. Phoebe was already suspicious that the wacky weather of late was somehow tied to her and her sisters and would have thought this to be proof, but she had seen several such buildings trapped in incredibly localized fog on her way in to work. That wasn't the reason she was afraid to enter the building.

Renegotiating her contract was only one of the things on Phoebe's mind. Growing up, she had never imagined herself being "contracted" to work anywhere. It just seemed so permanent, and in a way it was. Once she signed that piece of paper, she would be legally locked into her job for whatever period of time they mutually agreed upon.

Phoebe knew that it wasn't like she was signing her soul away. That was probably something more in line with her other, more magical, line of work. There was just something that seemed so *final* about what she was doing. No matter how much she liked the work and the attention it brought her, there was something intimidating about the possibility of doing this for the rest of her life.

In addition to the unexpected contract renegotiation, Phoebe was also dealing with the added responsibilities of interviewing for an assistant, figuring out her health insurance, and starting up a retirement plan. If that last part didn't make her feel old, she didn't know what would. Add her recent divorce from Cole to that list and she was feeling prematurely aged.

Well, here I go, she thought as she took a deep breath and enjoyed the last bit of sunshine before entering her fog-enshrouded workplace.

"There you are," her editor, Elise Rothman, said before Phoebe even stepped into the office's bull pen. "I swear I'm going to have you hooked

up to a GPS system so I know where you are every minute of the day."

"Well, then at least one of us will know," Phoebe said as they walked to her private office. "I never know if I'm coming or going anymore."

"I hope you're coming in with your latest column," Elise said. "And maybe your comments on the new contract?"

"Ummm," Phoebe couldn't even come up with a good excuse. She thought they were going to talk about the contract, but clearly Elise was more concerned about the column. And there were deadlines to meet, after all. Phoebe knew she was right near the end of hers.

"Phoebe, we *do* have a paper to publish," Elise said firmly.

Phoebe had to think quickly. "I'm working on it, Elise. In fact, that's why I'm here. Have I ever left you hanging before?" she replied sweetly.

"Something tells me I'm not getting even one of the things I'm hoping for."

"Well, it's just—"

"Never mind," Elise said, holding up her hand for emphasis. "I know everything will be settled at the very last moment. You're nothing if not consistent on pushing deadlines."

Phoebe wasn't crazy about the fact that her reputation was that she kept people waiting until the last second on things. Then again, it was weird to think she was in a place in her life where her "reputation" didn't have a thing to do

with what she had been up to when she used to ditch chemistry with Josh Login in high school. Somehow, she had managed to become that which she always feared: a grown-up.

"I actually need to talk to you about an entirely different matter." Elise took a seat in Phoebe's guest chair.

Phoebe had hoped she could get to work on either the article or the contract as soon as she got in the office. Once Elise sat, she knew both of those things had just gotten back-burnered. She took a seat at her desk. "Yes?"

"I know your column keeps you very busy," Elise said. "But I was hoping you could help me out of a little jam."

"Oh, Elise, you know I'll be happy to do anything," Phoebe said, then added, "if I can."

"This is right up your alley," Elise quickly added with a wave of her hand as if it was nothing. "You see, Granny Goodwords had to take a short sabbatical."

"Granny Goodwords?"

"Our children's advice columnist for the Sunday supplement," Elise said as if Phoebe should know what she was talking about. "Kids write to her asking for help with their little problems, like 'My friend keeps teasing me,' 'My brother ripped off my favorite doll's head' . . . that kind of thing. Granny Goodwords tells them how to handle the situation."

"Uh-huh," Phoebe said, surprised to find that

the paper had another advice columnist. She really needed to be more on top of things if she was expected to be a grown-up.

"Anyway," Elise continued, "Granny Goodwords had to go visit her sister in Toronto for a few weeks. She's in the hospital."

"I hope it's nothing serious," Phoebe said, now feeling guilty for not having introduced herself to Granny, or even knowing the woman's real name. Somehow, she doubted that the woman's parents had looked at the baby in the bassinet and said, "Elisabeth . . . no . . . Patricia . . . no . . . How about Granny!"

"Right now it's just some tests," Elise said. "But, as you can imagine, Granny is going to be so preoccupied with her sister that she won't be able to focus on her column . . . so I was hoping that—just for a few weeks—you could be Granny Goodwords."

"Me?" Phoebe asked. "*Granny* Goodwords?"

Phoebe didn't know how to respond. The offer was innocuous enough. It wasn't like she hadn't already shown a knack for giving advice. But there was just something about the name *Granny* Goodwords that she was having some trouble getting past.

"Excuse me, Elise," Norah Johnson said as she stepped into Phoebe's office. "Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to let you know I was heading out to cover that possible kidnapping."

As Elise and Norah spoke about some missing

boy, Phoebe discreetly glanced down at her shiny silver letter opener and tried to angle the metal so she could see her reflection. With all the contracts and retirement funds conversations of late, combined with being asked to take on the role of a "Granny," she wasn't surprised when she thought she saw the beginnings of wrinkles around her eyes.

"Phoebe?" Elise asked.

Phoebe slammed the letter opener down on her desk when she realized that Norah had left the room and Elise was staring at her.

"Kidnapping?" she asked, hoping to keep the subject off herself for a moment. There wasn't a doubt that she would help Elise, but she wanted to get used to the whole "Granny" thing first.

"Or a runaway," Elise replied. "We don't know yet. Right now it's just a missing boy. . . . You know, I remember a time when I never referred to these stories as *just* a missing child. Maybe I'm getting jaded. Or maybe it's just the way I cope with it."

Phoebe knew what Elise was talking about. After saving so many innocents she certainly was more used to the idea, but she also knew that each one was important. She hoped that she'd never lose that feeling.

"I'm sure at some point in the day it'll hit me," Elise continued. "And my mind will get stuck on whatever could be happening to poor little Tyler Michaels."

"Excuse me?" Phoebe said. She hadn't expected to hear a name she recognized. "Did you say Tyler Michaels?"

"Yes," Elise said. "Is something wrong?"

"Remember how I said earlier that I didn't know if I was coming or going?" Phoebe asked as she stood.

"Yes?" Elise stayed in her chair, a look of confusion crossing her face.

"Well, I'm going."

Paige shut the Book of Shadows with a groan.

Still no luck, she thought in frustration.

She had been searching for a clue to the strange weather ever since a giant hailstone had clocked her on the side of the head earlier in the week. Leo had managed to heal the bruise for her, but he'd failed to convince her that the demon hail hadn't been aiming specifically for her. Even he began to get suspicious as the weather continued to behave in the most bizarre fashion.

But the Book of Shadows failed to provide any answers.

Paige worried that one of the reasons she wasn't finding anything in the huge book was because her mind wasn't totally on her work. Actually, the real problem was that her mind *was* totally on her work— on her professional work.

Helping to finalize Tyler Michaels's adoption earlier in the week had affected Paige in ways she

had never realized it would. Instead of seeing it for the success that it was, she could only see the adoption as a near failure of the system solely because she couldn't explain the fact that the boy's last set of foster parents had been a pair of demons trying to corrupt him into becoming a bodyguard for The Source.

When Paige had met Tyler, she had seen him as a kindred spirit because he was also learning about a power he never knew he had. He was a Firestarter on the run from his foster demons. Paige took him home, where Tyler immediately bonded with the family, especially Piper. And once they saved the day, Paige made it her mission to find him a good family.

It didn't take long for Paige to come across Stephen and Maria Michaels, but it sure took forever to get them to be Tyler's parents. The time she spent working the case was time she knew should have been spent learning more about her new life as a Charmed One, but she certainly wasn't going to let Tyler slip through the cracks in the system. More and more she was considering taking a break from work to focus on learning about her magic, but she couldn't stop thinking about what she would do once she got past her studies.

Paige didn't want to be a burden, but she also didn't know what she wanted to be when she grew up, as the saying goes. That fear of her future was the one thing keeping her at her job,

in spite of the fact that she knew that the magic was the more important thing in her life.

Actually, right now the important thing was finding a reason behind the wacky weather, but the delicious smell of Piper's stew was driving her crazy even up in the attic, and she had to go down for a taste.

Piper put her lips together and gently blew on a spoonful of stew, then took another taste from the pot she had left simmering for the past half hour, only stirring on occasion. She let the stew roll over her tongue for a moment before swallowing. Then she looked off into space as she usually did when she was considering one of her creations.

Making her decision, she turned off the burner and carried the pot over to the sink, where she poured the stew into a strainer and watched as the broth slid down the drain. She placed the pot on the counter and took the strainer with its mixture of potatoes, nuts, and assorted other ingredients and dumped it in the trash.

"Leo!" she called through the house as she once again put pencil to paper.

It only took her husband a moment to get to the kitchen since he was just coming from the living room.

"Yes, dear," he said through tightly smiling teeth. It only took him a moment to notice that the pot was empty. "Why do I get the feeling that I'm going to the store again?"

"I'm sorry," Piper said. "But I really want this meal to be perfect. They keep calling from the club and I guess I was getting distracted and something just wasn't right. . . ."

"Piper," Leo said, carefully choosing his words. "It's your first day off in . . . what . . . decades? Maybe you should try . . . I don't know . . . relaxing?"

"I cook to relax," she replied simply. "Don't I seem relaxed?"

As if an answer to Piper's own question, the phone rang and, without even looking, she thrust out her hand and blew it up.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath. "I promise I will relax once I get started on the main course. But before I can do that, I need you to go to the store . . . please."

"You know, my powers really are supposed to be used for more productive purposes," he replied. "I'm not your mystical errand boy."

"No, you're my wonderfully sweet and understanding husband," Piper said, buttering him up. "Who has one heck of a gourmet dinner in his future, if only he'll go to the store for me one more time."

Leo gave her a look of exasperated resignation that silently told her that the dinner had better be really good and include one very rich and decadent dessert.

"I love you," Piper replied. She then handed over the newest list and watched him orb off.

"I love you, too," Paige said as she came

into the kitchen a moment after Leo had disappeared. "What's with the spontaneous admission of admiration?"

"Just sucking up to my husband," Piper replied as she took the trash bag out of the can and tied it up.

"And what's with the phone?" Paige asked as she saw the scorch marks and the phone guts hanging off the wall. "Did I miss a demon? Why the sudden interest in attacking our kitchen?"

"Sorry, my bad," Piper said, but chose not to explain further. "Any luck with our weather woes?"

"Nada," Paige replied.

"I'm sure you'll find something when you least expect it," Piper said as she opened the kitchen door and found her young friend, Tyler Michaels, standing there. He was wearing pajamas, but that wasn't what Piper noticed first. It was clear to her before she could say a word that not only was he out of breath, he was terrified.

Chapter 3

The upper-level demon known as Tempest leaned back in his stone chair and looked down at the minion who knelt before him. The chair was raised up on a platform specifically so the minion had to lift his head even higher to see his master towering above him, which was really the point of the layout of the entire room.

It was all Tempest could do to make the place more comfortable for himself.

It wasn't really a prison so much as a safe haven, as far as the demon was concerned. True, it was a safe haven he could leave only once a century, but he tried to focus on the positive. There was so much about the room to hate.

The room was actually more of a cave. But instead of an interestingly murky and damp cave that chilled him to the bone, the place was always kept pleasantly at room temperature.

The air inside never moved no matter how hard his minions waved their fans, trying to muster a breeze for him.

No fire would light.

No water would flow.

Not even a speck of dirt could enter the pristine stone room.

Tempest hated the place more than even *he* knew.

The demon was pointedly ignoring his minion, focusing on the little clear plastic cylinder filled with water spinning like a tornado. It was the one joy he had in life, though he didn't quite understand how the mysterious item worked or why it was allowed in his cave. He watched the water swirling and imagined the power of the tornado destroying whole cities. He would unleash it to do his bidding and cow humanity before him.

With a little imagination, a cheap little novelty toy can be really entertaining, he thought.

"You may rise," he said to his minion, putting aside the toy.

When the lesser demon stood, his head was still two feet below his master's due to the height of the platform on which the chair sat. A bruise was forming on the minion's face, but the cut was already healing. His master had not inflicted the wound.

Tempest looked down at his minion.

"Well, you may speak," he said, prodding the dullard.

"Oh, great and powerful one," the minion said.

"Enough with the empty praise," the demon replied. "My ego is fine, really. Move it along."

"I am so sorry for this failure," the minion continued, bowing repeatedly as he spoke.

"I'm getting seasick," Tempest said. "Stand up straight. Be a demon."

"Yes, master," the minion replied.

Ego aside, Tempest did like the "master" part.

"I am so sorry for failing you once again," the minion continued. "It was beyond my control. I was unprepared for what was waiting. That is no excuse, but I beg your forgiveness."

Tempest paused to let his minion sweat the moment. He picked up the file on the table beside his chair and flipped through it. Yesterday's "failure," as the minion had put it, was actually a success. Not only was their prey dead, but they also managed to get a very important piece of information. The file was incredibly thorough and had already proved to be very useful. It did have one rather important omission, but his minion had found that out earlier, so he figured that they were back ahead of the game.

"Okay," Tempest said.

"Okay, master?" the minion asked.

"Okay, I accept your apology," Tempest replied simply. "What, did you think I was going to kill you or something?"

"Well . . . yes," the minion said. The relief was evident on his face.

"Now really, if I killed you then I'd have to find someone to replace you," Tempest explained. "And do you know how hard it his to find help when you're confined to a stone room?"

"But you will be free tonight," the minion said with forced exuberance, as if Tempest needed to be reminded.

"And if everything goes according to plan, I may never need to rely on minions again," Tempest said. "So, you see. I may still kill you yet."

Actually, that was a lie, since Tempest really didn't have the power to do that, but as long as his minions were not aware of that fact, he was going to use their ignorance to his benefit.

"Thank you, my master," the minion said, not knowing how else to reply.

I really need to invest in higher quality minions, Tempest thought.

"Of course, you do realize that you are no longer in charge of the others," Tempest said. "That responsibility has been passed onto someone more worthy."

"Yes, master," the minion said. "May I ask . . ."

"She is watching the house," Tempest explained. "Go, join your cohorts. She will summon you when the time is right."

"Leo!" Piper called out once again.

This time Leo appeared in front of her immediately, even though he had been considerably farther away than the living room.

"Leave something off the list?" Leo asked as he orbed back into the kitchen. Then he saw Tyler sitting at the table drinking hot chocolate beside Paige. "Hey, Tyler. I didn't know you were coming by . . . in your pajamas?"

Tyler just stared into his hot chocolate.

"So far, our best guess is sleepwalking," Paige said. "Tyler's been kind of mum on the subject."

Piper pulled Leo off to the side so they could talk quietly, as if Tyler wouldn't know they were talking about him.

"He just showed up and wouldn't say a word," she whispered. "But we can see the fear in his eyes. Not to mention the whole sleepwear ensemble."

"Maybe we should call his parents," Leo suggested.

"Before we know what's going on?" Piper asked. "They don't know anything about his powers."

"Well, they must know something's wrong," Leo said. "They're probably worried sick."

"And if we call them, they'll insist on coming over here," Piper said. "By the time they get here, who knows what they could walk into? I promised Tyler a normal life."

"And we'll do our best to help him have it," Leo said, putting an arm around her. "But we're not going to be able to do anything about it if he won't tell us what's going on."

"Maybe he just needs a few minutes," Piper said. "I'm sure he'll open up to me."

Piper and Tyler had bonded almost immediately when Paige brought him home several months earlier. At the time, Piper had been a major proponent of letting him keep his Firestarter power to control flames with his mind. As he started to learn how to use his emotions to control the fire he created, Piper also started to understand how it had the potential to overwhelm him as he tried to grow up a normal kid. Eventually, she agreed with his decision to have the powers bound until he was older. She even made the potion that would keep his powers subdued.

Piper kept in touch with Tyler throughout the adoption process, wanting to be there for him should he ever need her help. When he suddenly showed up on their back porch minutes ago, she knew that his dream of normality hadn't lasted nearly as long as either of them had hoped.

"Has he said *anything*?" Leo asked.

"I didn't want to push," Piper replied. "I figured some hot chocolate might open him up."

Just then they heard the front door open and slam shut.

"Piper! Paige!" Phoebe called out as she came into the house. "I think we've got a"—she entered the kitchen and saw Tyler—"problem."

"Way ahead of you, sis," Paige said.

"Hey, Tyler," Phoebe said as she turned to Piper. "What's going on?"

"We were hoping Tyler could fill us in on that

one," Piper said as she sat next to her young friend.

Tyler took another sip of his hot chocolate. "I thought it was all supposed to stop," he said. "Once you took away my powers."

"Tyler, I didn't *take* your powers," Piper corrected him. "You've still got them. You just can't use them right now."

"Is that why they came after me?" he asked.

"Who?" Piper asked, her defenses immediately raised. "Who came after you?"

"I don't know," Tyler said, pushing aside his mug. "I woke up this morning and there was this guy holding me down."

"Did he look like a normal guy?" Phoebe asked as she took a seat at the table. "Or did he look kinda demony?"

"Demony?" he asked.

"You know," Paige said. "Horns . . . glowing eyes . . . a tail . . . all of the above."

"He looked normal," Tyler replied, which didn't really prove anything. Most of the demons they dealt with took on human form. "He kept pushing down on my chest. And he was mumbling . . . about not failing again or something. I thought that Source thing wasn't supposed to be interested in me anymore."

"You don't have to worry about him right now. He's not in the picture," Paige said. "Or, wait . . . is he back again? I lose track."

Piper ignored her sister. "Tyler, I don't think it

would be The Source. His minions can only track you when you use your powers. You should be safe with those bound."

"Maybe somebody didn't get the memo," Phoebe suggested.

"What happened, then?" Piper asked, hoping that what Phoebe had suggested, though meant to be sarcastic, wasn't the case.

"I was gonna yell," Tyler said, "but I thought he might be a demon and I didn't want Maria and Stephen . . . I mean . . . Mom and Dad . . . to get hurt. So I . . ." He trailed off.

"It's okay," Piper said. "You can tell us."

"Ever since I moved in with my parents," he continued, "I've been sleeping with a bat by my bed."

"Hey, slugger, I could teach you a few things," Paige said. "I'm on the center's softball team."

"I don't think that's why he's got the bat," Piper said. "It's to protect you from demons, isn't it?"

Tyler just nodded his head as he continued. "The demon was concentrating on his hands or something. He wasn't looking at my face. So, I reached out and grabbed the bat and hit him in the head."

"Home run!" Paige laughed.

"He kinda fell," Tyler continued. "But not really. Just got sort of wobbly. I jumped out of bed, but he was between me and the door. So

I opened the window, climbed down the tree, and ran."

"All the way here?" Phoebe asked. "That's over a mile."

"It's not that far," Tyler said as if he did it all the time. "I know the demon followed me out of the house, but I'm pretty sure I lost him. I had to keep hiding to make sure he wasn't following me." He looked back out the window to check for demons.

"I'm sure no one did," Piper said quickly. "Or they would have grabbed you before you got in the house. "You're safe here."

"First thing we have to do is let your parents know you're here," Paige said.

"We can't," Phoebe jumped in. "If my paper's got a reporter at his house then there have to be about a dozen others. Add to that the cops and maybe even the FBI, and I don't see how we can get a message to them without bringing a ton of people to our door."

"I think we have to focus on finding out who's after him," Leo suggested. "Once we take care of the problem we can get Tyler home."

"Quick, to the batcave," Paige said as they got up, moving to the attic and the Book of Shadows.

Piper took Tyler by the hand and led him out of the room. She took a quick glance back to her bare stovetop, knowing the odds of getting any more cooking in today were slim to none. She

was halfway up the first flight of stairs with Tyler and her family when the doorbell rang.

Everyone froze.

"Okay," Phoebe said. "You guys go up to the attic. I'll get the door."

Piper, Leo, Paige, and Tyler silently continued on up to the attic as Phoebe slowly made her way down the steps. She peeked out the window to give them a second to get safely upstairs and saw that it was Darryl at the door. Phoebe literally breathed a sigh of relief as she moved to open it.

Darryl considered ringing the doorbell again, but suspected it was pointless. Piper's SUV was in the drive, so he figured they were probably home, unless they had beamed themselves somewhere. He was still getting used to that "orbing" thing where people popped all over town. When he saw Phoebe peek out the window, he figured that they had just been up in the attic or something, which was why it was taking so long to answer the door.

"Hey, Darryl," Phoebe said as the door swung open.

"Morning, Phoebe," Darryl replied. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"Not at all," Phoebe said with a transparent smile. Darryl didn't have to be a detective to get the impression that she had been in the middle of something when he rang the bell. Although

Darryl knew all about the Charmed Ones' more secret activities, they were always reluctant to get the inspector involved. Sometimes he appreciated being ignorant, while other times . . . not so much.

"Can I come in?" Darryl asked when she failed to offer.

"Sure, sure," Phoebe said quickly, and waved him into the house. "So what brings you here on a Saturday morning?"

"Phoebe," Darryl said. "I'm going to ask you a question right now, and the answer is 'no', okay?"

Phoebe looked at him questioningly. "Okaaay."

"Here, let's rehearse it," he added. "Say it with me now . . ."

"No," they said in unison.

Even though she was playing along, Phoebe's face registered concern along with her confusion.

"Good," he said. "Now, I'm working on a missing child case, and your sister's name came up during the investigation. You wouldn't happen to have seen a Tyler Michaels recently."

Phoebe looked up at Darryl, but did not respond.

"Okay, this is the part where you say 'no,'" Darryl said, as if she needed prodding.

Phoebe easily could have done as he asked, but she hated lying to Darryl. She especially hated the idea of him chasing leads all over the

city when the boy in question was currently two floors above him.

"Darryl," she said in a tone that indicated he was about to hear something he didn't want to know.

"No," Darryl repeated. "We just rehearsed this."

"And I would love to tell you what you want me to," Phoebe said, then took what Darryl considered to be an extremely unnecessary long pause.

"But?"

"But he's upstairs."

Darryl looked at the staircase, admitting to himself that she just confirmed what he had expected all along.

"Come on," she said with a sigh as she led him up to the attic.

Darryl followed, trying to figure out in how many ways his day had just become more difficult. On the one hand, he had found the missing child in near record time and, at least for the moment, the boy was safe and sound. On the other hand, there was no telling how long Tyler would be safe if he had to go to the Charmed Ones for help. Not to mention the fact that Darryl was fairly sure he wasn't going to be able to tell anyone about his single-handedly solving the case that the cops, the FBI, and various news agencies were currently working on.

He wasn't at all surprised to see Piper and

Leo standing in the middle of the attic with the missing child in question. The smile that was on Tyler's face in the photo his parents had showed Darryl was long gone. In its place was a look quite similar to that which Darryl's own son had worn on his face during the previous night's storm. Darryl's hope that it was just a simple runaway situation disappeared when he saw Paige flipping through the Book of Shadows.

"Hey, Darryl, how's it going?" Leo asked.

"Well, let's see," Darryl said. "Half the force and the FBI are currently scouring the city for that boy standing right next to you. So I'd say things are about par for the course."

Tyler took a step closer to Piper.

"Tyler, this is our friend Darryl," Piper said in a calm and reassuring tone. "He's a police officer."

"Don't worry," Phoebe added. "He's one of the good guys."

"Thanks," Darryl said sarcastically as he nodded hello to Tyler. He knew why Phoebe had said what she said, but still hated the fact that more and more often it seemed that people had to point out when the police were on their side.

Tyler gave a tentative smile in response.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," Paige mumbled as she flipped to the page about Firestarters. She was actually glad that Darryl had showed up, because it was easier to have the police around on those occasions when you also had the police looking for the person standing in

the middle of your attic. Aside from that fact, she really liked Darryl. He was just one of those people who knew what he wanted out of life and had found the perfect job to suit him. She was a little envious of that, considering her current state of affairs.

Paige gave Darryl a welcoming smile and went to work on the Firestarter information. The book was familiar enough to her that it only took her a moment to realize something was different.

"Well, what do you know," she said aloud. "Looky here."

"Find something?" Leo asked.

"There's a new entry under our little Firestarter," she replied.

"Firestarter?" Darryl asked. "Like the movie?"

"Pretty much," Paige said, then turned her attention back to the group. "It still lists the basics . . . extremely rare and magical creature . . . power linked to the emotions . . . trained to be bodyguards for The Source."

"See!" Tyler said.

"Hey, we've dealt with him before, haven't we?" Piper said, trying to be reassuring. "What's the new part?"

Paige continued to read. "'Firestarters play an essential role in the Night of Aeolus.'"

"What's an a-o-lus?" Tyler asked.

"Not a what . . . a who," Phoebe replied. "He's the Greek God of the winds."

Everyone in the room gave her a curious look.

"What? I've always been interested in Ancient Greece," she replied defensively. "I love that time in history with the art, the science . . ."

"The simple, yet elegant fashions," Paige added.

"Can I help it if I look good in well-draped sheets?" Phoebe replied slyly.

"Yeah, okay, we'll get you an outfit for your birthday," Piper said, trying to rush things along. "What's with this Night of Aeolus, Paige?"

Paige flipped through the book and found an entry she had never seen before. That wasn't much of a surprise, since the dearly departed Halliwell women were always adding things to the book when needed. Paige scanned through the text.

"Well, this would have been useful a week ago," Paige said. "The Night of Aeolus is pretty much the entire reason the weather has been so freaky lately."

Chapter 4

"'The Night of Aeolus,'" Paige read aloud. "'Once every century, the planets align in such a way that it causes the winds to shift and the climate to change. During that period, weather becomes unstable and the Earth begins to shake as the world falls out of balance.'"

"Oh great, once again we have to save the world," Phoebe droned sarcastically. "How many times have we done that this month?"

"Hey, I just came here looking for a missing boy," Darryl reminded them. "This is a little more than I bargained for."

Tyler looked worried when Darryl referred to him.

"Don't worry," Piper said. "You're not going anywhere yet. So, how do we put the world in balance again, Paige?"

"Apparently, we don't," she replied as she

continued to read. "'On the Night of Aeolus, by the light of the full moon, the elements must come together to set everything in its proper place. To do this, a Firestarter"—she nodded in Tyler's direction—"is charged with gathering other Elementals at the Circle of Gaea to perform the Ritual of the Guardians."

Tyler looked even more worried. "What are Elementals? Does that mean there are others like me?"

"Well, we knew that Firestarters were rare, but it didn't mean you were the only one," Piper said.

"I don't think it's just other Firestarters," Phoebe added. "I think it means people who can control the other elements."

"Other elements?" Tyler asked.

"Earth, wind, and water," Phoebe explained.

"Earthstarters?" Tyler asked, making a lame attempt at a joke to lighten the mood for himself more than anyone. "That sounds stupid."

"I'm sure they have some other name," Piper said, playing along. "So I guess we have to help Tyler collect the other Elementals. When is this Night of Aeolus?"

"Um . . . ," Paige replied. "Tonight."

"Tonight?" Piper repeated as she joined her sister at the book. "Then why didn't Grams or someone add this little tidbit to the book earlier? We could have been working on this all week. It's not like we've got a bunch of time to run

around the city and find . . . what? Three people by the end of the day with absolutely no information on who they are?"

"Just out of curiosity," Darryl said, "what happens if the Firestarter doesn't find these . . . Elementals, and they don't come together for this Ritual of the Guardians and the Circle of whasis?"

"Gaea," Paige said, glancing at Tyler. "If the elements do not combine, the weather will continue to wreak havoc . . . and could eventually tear the world apart."

"Wait a minute," Tyler said, his voice quivering. "You mean *I* have to save the world?"

"Don't worry, we've had a lot of practice at this," Piper said reassuringly. "It's not as hard as you'd think."

"But . . . the *whole* world?" Tyler asked again, his eyes showing how overwhelmed he was by the news.

"It's okay," Phoebe said as she put a hand on the boy's shoulder to calm him. "We're here—"

Phoebe's voice cut off as her mind flashed with the image of a man standing on the rail of the Golden Gate Bridge . . . then jumping . . . then bursting into a ball of flame. Then, just as suddenly, her mind was back with her in the attic.

"What?" Piper asked, recognizing the signs of her sister getting a vision.

"I think I know why that stuff was just added

to the book," Phoebe said, looking down at Tyler. "I don't think Tyler was supposed to be involved in the ritual . . . and neither were we."

"What do you mean?" Darryl asked. "What's going on now?"

Phoebe looked down at the boy again. "Tyler, why don't you go downstairs and pour yourself some more hot chocolate."

Tyler looked up at Phoebe—well, technically, due to an early growth spurt, he was almost as tall as her and pretty much looked her directly in the eyes. "Do you really think what you're going to say is any worse than the things I'm going to think of if I'm *not* in the room?"

"Smart kid," Paige said.

"Phoebe, what did you see?" Piper asked, obviously agreeing with the boy. "Was it Tyler's future?"

"No," Phoebe replied. "It didn't involve Tyler at all. Not directly, at least. I saw some guy . . . I think it was the weather guy on San Fran News . . . I saw him jump off the Golden Gate Bridge and . . . he kinda . . . exploded before he hit the water."

"I know about that," Darryl said. "But it happened yesterday. That's not in the future."

"Yeah, welcome to my wacky power," Phoebe said.

"But why are you seeing some other guy when you touched Tyler?" Paige asked.

"Sounds like he was a Firestarter too," Leo

said. "Maybe he and Tyler are linked somehow through their power."

"And that guy was supposed to be the one gathering the Elementals," Piper added, working through the puzzle. "But when he died the responsibility passed to Tyler."

"But why did he commit suicide?" Phoebe asked. "I mean . . . I know saving the world is a big responsibility and all, but hey, we do it once a week."

"I don't think it was suicide," Darryl said. "Witnesses reported he was being chased by some guys."

"You mean demons," Phoebe said.

"So it *is* demons! I knew it!" Tyler said.

"It's okay," Leo said. "All we have to do is figure out who these demons are—"

"Or who they work for," Piper added, scanning down the page her sister had open. "There's more on this Night of Aeolus. It says, 'If the Elementals use the ritual to divert the power of the elements to the demon Tempest, he will be able to control the weather and the very Earth itself.'"

"I was about to get to that," Paige mumbled.

"Sorry," Piper said. "Maybe you can look up this Tempest fella."

"I don't suppose he's one of those demons that wants to control the weather so everyone gets to have a tropical vacation," Phoebe said.

"Let's find out," Paige said as she flipped

through the book. "Let's see . . . Tempest . . . Tempest . . . I have a *Tempus*."

"Been there, vanquished him," Piper said.

Paige continued flipping, "Here we are . . . Tempest. . . . Oh, this is *so* not good."

"Of course not," Phoebe mumbled.

"Give us the Cliff's Notes version," Piper said.

"Well, in short, Tempest is *all* about controlling the weather," Paige said.

"Yeah, we got that part," Phoebe interrupted. "Jump to the good stuff."

"He was banished to a neutral environment that he can only leave on the Night of Aeolus," Paige continued. "Tempest commands a quartet of demons with the ability to drain the powers of Elementals. . . . Oh, and look at this, they can absorb witches' powers too. Goody. . . . Anyway, if the powers can be collected from four Elementals by the Night of Aeolus, they will transfer those powers to their master, and he will be able to control the weather all over the world."

"I'm guessing it was one of his minions in Tyler's room this morning," Leo said.

"But he couldn't drain anything because Tyler's powers are bound," Piper added.

"So this Tempest guy has demons that run around and do the dirty work for him?" Darryl asked. The question was mostly rhetorical because he was regretfully familiar with the tendency of the demon community to rely on lackeys.

"Hmmm," Paige said. "That's what we need . . . minions. We could send them out vanquishing demons while we just lay around the house eating bonbons."

"Or cooking," Piper added wistfully.

"Or renegotiating our contracts so that we have an exit clause in cases of a change in management oversight pursuant to the fair work practices decision in—" Phoebe stopped herself when she realized she had gone a little overboard. "Sorry. I guess I *am* beginning to understand some of the legalese in my contract."

"Okay, so what's the plan?" Darryl asked, wanting to be able to *do* something. "I mean, we gotta get moving on these Elementals, and there's a big demon and a bunch of little demons to deal with."

"Well, I think our focus should be the Elementals," Leo said.

"But where is this 'Circle of Gaea' thing?" Paige asked. "We have to know how to get the Elementals there."

"And how did the demons find Tyler in the first place?" Piper asked.

"Maybe they tracked the shift in powers from the dead guy," Phoebe suggested.

"I think we're making a few too many assumptions."

"What if these Elementals aren't in the area?"

"How are we supposed to take Tyler around if half the city is looking for him?"

"Hey, Piper, how about some of that stew before we get to work," Paige said. Piper just glared in response. "Okay, maybe later."

And just like that, the five adults in the room started talking about what to do and how to do it. Their cross talk was fast-paced and utterly confusing, based on conjecture and assumptions that weren't leading them anywhere. But that all stopped once Tyler spoke up.

"Umm," he said tentatively. "Can I have my powers back?"

"What?" Piper asked. "Why?"

"So I can protect myself," Tyler said.

"But we can protect you," Piper replied. "Like we did last time."

"Actually, honey," Leo said. "I think he protected us a bit too."

"I promise I won't use them unless I have to," Tyler said.

"I think he's going to need them tonight anyway," Phoebe added.

Piper thought it over for a moment. When they first met, she had been so much in favor of allowing him to grow up with his power remaining active, it was odd that she was reluctant to give it back to him. It was just that she had gotten so used to the idea of Tyler having a normal life that she didn't want to put that in jeopardy. Then again, it looked like the fates were conspiring against that normal life happening this weekend.

"Okay," Piper said. "But remember, the power is tied to your emotions, so you have to stay in control."

"I remember," Tyler said. "But do I have to drink that horrible blue juice again?"

Piper smiled. He was referring to the binding potion she had made for him. She suspected it tasted nothing like her Mulligatawny stew. "No," she replied, flipping through the Book of Shadows. "I suspected we'd have to undo the binding someday, so I wrote up a special spell for it. I just didn't think we'd be using it so soon."

Phoebe joined Piper and Paige at the Book of Shadows and they all joined hands and read together:

When time is ready
Or need is dire,
Unbind his power
Return the fire.

"Did it work?" Phoebe asked as she and her sisters unclasped hands.

Tyler looked at Piper, then held out his hand, palm up, in front of him. He scrunched up his face while focusing on his hand and Piper knew he was concentrating on letting his emotions fuel his fire. But instead of a small fire dancing in his palm, a giant fireball shot out of Tyler's hands, knocking him back a step and torching a box of Christmas decorations.

"Fire extinguisher!" Paige called out, and a moment later the item appeared in her hand. She sprayed down the fire calmly, having burned a few things herself in her own exploration of magic.

"Sorry," Tyler said sheepishly. "I was just trying to make a little fire, like a candle."

"It's okay," Piper said. "Your power has been dormant for a while. It makes sense that it would come on a little strong the first time you used it. I should have warned you about that."

"Maybe someone should open a window," Phoebe suggested as the room filled with smoke and the smell of the extinguisher's chemicals.

"Got it," Darryl said as he moved toward the nearest window and opened it, letting in some fierce breezes. He leaned out for some fresh air and saw something that made him pull himself right back into the room.

"What is it?" Piper asked when she saw his very sudden movement.

"We've got company," he replied as the doorbell rang.

Chapter 5

"I do so love it when the demons are kind enough to use the doorbell," Paige said.

"It's not a demon," Darryl corrected her, almost preferring that it were some evil being come to kill them with magical powers. "It's Agent Harkins from the FBI."

"The Feds are after me too?" Tyler asked.

"'The Feds?'" Piper said to the boy. "Exactly how much TV do your parents let you watch?"

"Piper!" Tyler said, with concern in his voice.

"Technically, you *are* a missing child," Phoebe reminded him.

"One that needs to stay missing for the moment," Piper said.

"Maybe we should just ignore it," Leo suggested. "If we're not here, he might go away."

"Which would be fine if I wasn't just opening a window while Harkins was coming up the

walk," Darryl said, his mind working on the problem. There was really no reason Harkins had to come in the house that he could think of. "Don't know if he saw me, but I'm not willing to play those odds with Tyler up here. He's probably just checking out Paige's connection to Tyler. Let's not give him a reason to get suspicious."

"Okay," Paige said as she came around from behind the Book of Shadows. "I'll go downstairs with Darryl. You guys stay up here with Tyler and try to be quiet."

As they started down the stairs, Darryl prepped Paige for what to expect. "He'll probably ask when you last saw Tyler and what kind of mood he's been in."

"It was earlier this week," Paige said. "When we finalized the adoption papers. And, aside from the whole being-chased-by-demons thing, he's been a pretty happy kid. I assume he'll ask about the fact that Tyler's last set of foster parents went suspiciously missing."

"Yeah, and if we can avoid telling him that they were blown up, or melted, or split into a thousand tiny particles, that would be best," Darryl said, trying to lighten the mood. He knew Paige would be fine answering Harkins's questions. All three of the Charmed Ones were good at explaining the unexplained. Darryl was getting better at it too, he realized with regret. He braced himself as Paige opened the door.

"Yes?" she asked as she saw the agent.

"Sorry to . . ." Harkins trailed off as he saw Darryl. "Inspector Morris, I was wondering where you were off to."

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that," Darryl replied as he looked past the FBI agent. His unmarked-but-obviously-FBI car was parked on the street with the same man in the driver's seat. Darryl glanced up at the sky and noticed that the storm clouds were, quite literally, gathering above. "I happen to know Paige and her sisters, so I thought I'd track down that lead myself. Paige, this is Sam Harkins."

"Mr. Harkins," Paige said as she held out her hand.

"Ms. Matthews," Harkins replied as he shook it. His body leaned forward, implying that he wanted to be asked in. "I assume Inspector Morris filled you in on the situation."

"Yes," Paige said, blocking the doorway. "Have you heard anything new about Tyler?"

"No," Harkins replied. "But I was hoping you might be able to help us."

"I've been trying," Paige replied. "But I'm sorry, I just don't know where he'd be."

"She hasn't seen him since the family finalized the adoption papers earlier this week," Darryl repeated what she had just told him, hoping to finish the interview quickly by providing as much information as he could. "We were just going over places he might have gone if he did run away."

"Yeah," Paige agreed. "Sorry, but I don't know much about his favorite hangouts. Did you try some of his school friends?"

"I have agents on that right now," Harkins said.

"I know his previous foster parents are out of the picture," Paige volunteered a little too willingly. "I don't think they'd have anything to do with this."

"That was one of the first things I asked about," Darryl explained. He could tell that the agent was picking up on the weird vibe between him and Paige, so he decided to back off a little and let Paige do the rest of the talking. At least that was the plan until they heard the loud crash from upstairs.

All three of them slowly looked back to the staircase as if they expected to find something come tumbling down. After a beat, Darryl found Harkins staring at the two of them with a questioning look.

"That . . . would be . . . my sisters," Paige said, obviously stalling for time.

"They're cleaning the attic," Darryl filled in the blanks. "It took them five minutes to hear me ringing the bell when I got here."

"Yeah, when we get into a project, we *really* get into a project," Paige said as another crash punctuated her statement.

Darryl wondered what was going on upstairs. He was worried on several counts: First, for

Tyler's safety, then of course for Piper, Phoebe, and Leo, and finally for himself, if Harkins asked to see what all the noise was about.

"Things look fairly straightforward here," Darryl said, hoping Harkins wouldn't notice the tension in his voice. "I can finish up and report back to you."

Harkins looked a little skeptical. "I guess—"

Another loud crash from above cut him off, but this one seemed like it was coming from outside the house. Paige and Darryl stepped out of the doorway just in time to watch an old mantel clock come crashing to the ground three feet away from the FBI agent, followed by a shower of broken glass. When they looked up they saw the top of the attic window that Darryl had opened now had a hole smashed in its center.

The FBI agent looked at the more and more suspicious-acting duo.

"I know strange things have been coming out of the sky this week, but this is ridiculous," Paige said.

"Sorry!" Phoebe yelled as she stuck her head out the open part of the window.

Darryl couldn't help but notice that her head went back into the attic rather quickly, as if someone had yanked her back inside. He needed to get Harkins out of there immediately.

"Last time I cleaned my garage, I wound up with a big dent in the door when my cedar cabinet tipped over," Darryl said, before going back

to the subject of getting Harkins out of there. "Why don't we meet at the Michaels's place later. I'll call you if I find anything out in the meantime."

"Maybe I should have a look around," Harkins said.

"Oh, the place is such a mess and everything's crazy with the cleaning, as you can see," Paige said, looking down at the smashed clock on the ground. "I'd really hate for something else to nearly fall on you."

"I got it covered," Darryl added.

"If you're sure," Harkins said.

Even though Darryl nodded his consent, the agent didn't move.

"Darryl, can I see you down here for a moment?" he asked.

Darryl followed Harkins down to the sidewalk. He could see Paige stuck in the doorway, wanting to go up to help her sisters with whatever was going on, but knowing she couldn't leave just yet. He tried to hurry Harkins along by anticipating what the agent was going to say.

"I know I should have mentioned that I knew Paige and her sisters," Darryl offered. "But I was so focused on the case that I didn't realize I hadn't told you until I was halfway here."

Harkins seemed to consider Darryl's words for a moment. "Hey, I know these cases get us all a little geared up," he replied. "But we gotta keep each other in the loop on what's going on.

Don't go getting like those cops that can't stand when the FBI enters their turf."

"That's not the case here," Darryl said. "I was gonna call you right after I got done."

"If it was anyone else, I'd be concerned," Harkins said. "But I know you're one of the good guys. Just keep me posted, okay?"

"Sure thing," Darryl said as they shook hands. He watched as Harkins joined his partner in the car. As they drove off, Darryl could see Harkins reach for the radio. He knew immediately that their ruse hadn't been entirely successful.

"That was close," Paige said as Darryl got back to the door. "You don't think he's going to come back with a warrant?"

"I don't think he could get one if he wanted to," Darryl said, though his mind was preoccupied with another thought. "There's nothing to base the warrant on, even though we couldn't have acted more suspiciously."

"What's the matter?" Paige asked. "Aren't we okay with him gone?"

"For the moment," Darryl said. "But I don't think he's going to leave us alone for long."

His statement was accentuated by the sound of a door being blown off its hinges.

"Maybe we should get upstairs," Darryl suggested.

Piper closed the attic door behind Paige and Darryl as they went downstairs to see what the

FBI agent wanted. For a moment, she thought back to her life before FBI agents were coming to her door . . . not to mention warlocks, and demons, and any number of other evil things. That was back when she had time in the day to work, cook for herself and her sisters, and even leave time for a bubble bath. Boy, how things had changed in recent years.

"I guess the first thing we should do is try to find out where these other Elementals are," Piper said as she crossed to the Book of Shadows.

When she reached the book, she heard Phoebe say "New plan!" and knew something was wrong. Piper turned around and saw that three rather large men and a very strong-looking woman—whom she assumed were demons—had just popped themselves inside.

Piper reflexively swung her hands up to stop time.

"There, that should—" but Piper was cut off by the fact that the demons had not frozen. The female demon then mimicked Piper's hand motion and a moment later, each of the male demons somehow managed to have a hold on Piper, Phoebe, and Leo, while the woman was grabbing for Tyler.

"What just happened?" Leo asked.

But there was no time to answer as Phoebe stomped her heel on the foot of the demon holding her and elbowed him in the gut. Then she took three giant steps across the room toward

her sister and levitated four feet in the air. Piper ducked just as Phoebe kicked her foot forward, and it met with the demon's chin, knocking him back and freeing Piper from his grip.

Leo then took the opportunity to slam his demon back into the wall behind him with a loud crash, as the demon smashed into the mirror hanging there.

Tyler used the distraction to slip free of the woman's grasp and hide behind some non-charred boxes of holiday decorations. The female demon saw him, though, and grabbed him by the foot, dragging him out from his hiding spot.

Piper could see him starting to concentrate on calling up his powers.

"Tyler, don't!" she said as she dove into the woman, sending them both crashing through a table.

When Piper got up, the demon was unconscious. Free to help the others, she took in her surroundings and found that Phoebe was in hand to hand combat with one of the demons while Leo was holding off the other two with a floor lamp.

"We can't use our powers," Piper instructed everyone as she helped Tyler off the floor. "The demons can absorb them and throw them back at us." She figured that was what had happened when she'd tried to stop time on the demons.

"Thanks for the suggestion," Phoebe said as her roundhouse kick connected with the side of

the demon's head, sending him sprawling across the floor. "But since you and Tyler are the only ones with defensive powers, I don't think we're in too much trouble."

Both women went to join Leo in fighting off the remaining two demons. Using the element of surprise, since the demons had their backs to them, Piper and Phoebe both managed to land a few good blows as Leo gave a jab to the one Phoebe attacked. These were the biggest of the demons, and they put up a good fight.

In the midst of the action, Piper saw the female demon regain consciousness and start toward Tyler again, but Piper was pinned against the wall and couldn't do anything about it.

"Phoebe!" she yelled when she saw that her sister and her husband seemed to have the other demon under control.

Phoebe moved to her sister first, but when she saw where Piper's eyes were turned, she adjusted her step toward Tyler. She grabbed Grams's mantel clock—the one she'd always hated—and threw it at the demon. The woman saw it in time to raise her arm and deflect it toward the window, where it crashed through the glass on the top.

Phoebe used the distraction to land a good blow on the woman's cheek.

She continued to the window to make sure the clock hadn't hurt anyone, since that particular window looked over the front yard, where Darryl

and her sister were probably talking to the FBI agent. A quick peek showed her that everyone was okay, and looking directly in her direction.

"Sorry!" she yelled down to them right before the woman pulled her back into the fight.

The fighting continued. Even though they were outnumbered, Piper, Leo, and Phoebe managed to hold off the four demons with a little assist from Tyler, who crawled his way underfoot of one of the smaller big guys at just the right moment.

Phoebe managed to lift the largest demon over her shoulder and fling him right through the attic door. With that demon unconscious, Phoebe, Leo, and Piper turned their attention on the remaining three in what seemed to be a stalemate. Piper reached for the side table next to the Book of Shadows and picked up a potion bottle with a green liquid inside.

"Anybody moves and they'll regret it," she said in the most threatening tone she could manage. "You might be able to take our powers, but I'm thinking that you won't be able to absorb this potion when it blows you up."

The demons seemed to consider what she was saying. Even though she only held one bottle, the three demons didn't like the odds that one of them would be the target.

"We're not finished," the woman said as she and the two remaining conscious demons disappeared.

"Why aren't they ever 'finished'?" Phoebe asked as she checked on Tyler. "Don't they know we're the Charmed Ones? Whatever happened to giving up without a fight?"

"Pretty convenient that you just happened to have a potion nearby," Leo said. "Especially one that would kill these specific demons that we've never encountered before."

"Oh, this," Piper said. "It's a sleeping draft Paige was working on."

"So, if you threw it at the demons, what would have happened?" Tyler asked.

"Nothing much," Piper said. "Probably just leave a nasty stain."

Chapter 6

"Somebody lose a demon?" Paige asked as she came back into the attic with Darryl, who was dragging the demon in question across the floor by his feet.

Darryl had gotten lots of practice carrying dead weight back at the Police Academy. He knew the proper way to bend and pull without doing damage to his own body. Technically, he was supposed to fling the body over his shoulder and do the fireman carry, but Darryl didn't want to give the demon that kind of leverage should he regain consciousness. The dummies at the Academy didn't have the power to fry him, or freeze him, or whatever this particular demon could do.

"Where do you want this?" he asked.

"Put him in the middle of the floor," Piper said as she slid some things out of the way to

give him a good clear spot to deposit the body. "We can hold him here and get some answers when he regains consciousness."

Darryl unceremoniously dropped the demon's feet when he reached the clearing. "You want me to interrogate him?"

"Actually, we've become surprisingly good at this," Phoebe said as she grabbed some candles off the table from which Piper had gotten the threatening sleeping potion.

"Besides, he'll know you're human . . . ," Paige said, but trailed off as if she was going to say more and chose not to.

"And therefore, not much of a threat," Darryl completed the thought. "Don't worry, I'm used to this by now."

"If it's any consolation, we might use the good cop/bad cop routine in your honor," Paige said weakly.

"Actually, I'm thinkin' just a bunch of bad cops," Phoebe said as she placed the candles in a circle around the body.

"How did things go with the FBI?" Piper asked.

"Pretty good, I think," Paige said. "The guy left."

"For the moment," Darryl added. "I think all the noise made him a little suspicious. Not to mention the fact that we wouldn't let him in the house. There's probably a car on the way with a couple of agents assigned to watch the place."

"What went on up here, anyway?" Paige asked.

"And where'd he come from?" Darryl added, pointing to the unconscious body.

"Tempest's demons attacked," Leo explained. "Three got away, but they left their friend behind."

Darryl watched as Phoebe lit the ring of candles and Piper came over to sprinkle some kind of powder along the rim. He had no clue what they were doing, but assumed that it was some kind of spell to keep the demon from zapping itself away or hurting anyone.

"Well, just let me know if you need anything," Darryl said, feeling utterly useless.

"Actually, if you could take Tyler downstairs for a while, that would be great," Piper said.

"But Piper, I'm not scared!" Tyler protested, although his eyes were wide and he wouldn't take them off the demon.

"I know you're not," Piper replied. "You were great when the demons attacked. But I don't want to give this one the chance to drain your powers. You're too important to this Night of Aeolus to risk letting the demon get his hands on you when he regains consciousness."

"But Piper!" he tried to protest again.

"Come on, kid," Darryl said as he put his hand on Tyler's shoulder. "We can watch TV. I think *Soul Train*'s on."

"Great," Tyler mumbled as he was led out of

the room, never taking his eyes off the demon.

As they left the attic, Darryl realized that the demon on the floor was probably the same one that had tried to take Tyler that morning. He had thought the bruise on the demon's face had come from the fight, but realized it probably had more to do with Tyler's bat. He was even more impressed by the kid now that he knew just how big the guy was. It certainly wasn't something that he, Darryl, wanted to wake up and find hovering over him.

Darryl guided Tyler down through the house and into the living room. "Stay clear of the windows," he warned. "In case Harkins's agents return and start peeking inside. I'll go wheel the TV in from the conservatory."

"That's okay," Tyler said. "I'm not in the mood for TV."

"Things must be serious," Darryl said as he took a seat on the couch beside Tyler. "If my son ever told me he wasn't in the mood for TV I'd rush him to the hospital."

Tyler smiled, slightly. "You have a son?"

"Just a little guy," Darryl replied. "Darryl Michael Morris Junior. Once this is over, I'll have to introduce you. His mom and I are always looking for baby-sitters."

"I'm only eleven," Tyler reminded him.

"You're an eleven-year-old who can handle being chased by demons," Darryl reminded him. "It took me three years to get used to that,

and it still trips me out every now and then. I think you'd be able to manage looking after my son for an evening."

This time, Tyler rewarded him with a real smile.

"Mr. Morris—," Tyler started.

"Please, call me Darryl," he said, cutting the boy off.

"Okay . . . Darryl," Tyler said. "Do you think I'll ever be able to have a normal life?"

That wasn't a question Darryl had been prepared to get, but, being a father, he was used to the unexpected quizzing every now and again. The thing about this particular question, though, was that it struck to the very core of what Darryl had been thinking about a lot recently. His life had taken a dramatic turn in the years since his partner was killed by a demon and he found out about the Charmed Ones and all the insanity that reality entailed.

He got used to the fact that his life would always be in jeopardy shortly after he graduated the Academy. That was just part of the job. Back then it was a simple matter of good guys versus bad guys. Today he was living in a world of gray. Now, he was lying at work, keeping secrets from his wife, and always had a nagging concern that he was putting his family's life in danger since the bad guys he dealt with weren't the kind that could be safely locked behind bars.

"Darryl?" Tyler prodded him for an answer, rousing him from his thoughts.

"Tyler, I'm going to be honest with you," Darryl said, figuring that the kid had been through enough already in his relatively short life that he could handle the truth. "I don't know what a normal life is. I don't have any magic powers, and I'm in the middle of this just like you. What I do know is that those ladies upstairs will always be watching out for you. If they say you're going to have a normal life, then it will be as normal as they can make it for you."

"Thanks, Darryl," Tyler said, apparently satisfied with the answer.

Unfortunately, it didn't manage to ease Darryl's mind at all.

"Paige, remember how I filled the stew pot with water and left it soaking while I made the cocoa?" Piper asked as she looked over their work.

"Yeah," Paige replied.

"Would you do the honors?" Piper asked, nodding toward the unconscious demon.

"Certainly," Paige replied as she held out both hands. "Stew pot!" The pot orbed from the kitchen into her hands. She leaned the pot over the head of the demon and slowly poured out the soapy water, careful not to let it splash and put out the candles. Once a third of the water had been poured on his head, the demon woke, spitting soap from his mouth.

"What the—," he started to yell before he took in his surroundings and suddenly had very little to say.

"Hi there," Piper said. "Your friends had to leave without you. But don't worry, we're not going anywhere for the moment."

The demon sat up and, like a petulant child, turned away from her.

"Hi," Phoebe said when she found the demon facing her. "You can turn in any direction you like, it doesn't really matter. You're kinda surrounded."

"You can't hurt me," the demon said.

"Oh, I'm thinking we can," Piper chimed in as she slid next to her sister. "You see, we know you can absorb our powers and throw them back at us, but I'm figuring that little ability doesn't work against potions or spells."

She threw a glance at Phoebe, who waved a piece of paper in front of the demon's face. "Admittedly, it's not one of my best, but we were in a rush."

"Now, you're going to tell us how you tracked Tyler here," Piper said.

"We didn't track him," the demon replied.

"Well, you're here," Paige said. "So, somehow I don't think we believe you."

"We knew he'd be here," the demon said. "There was no *tracking*."

"How did you know that?" Piper asked. "*We* didn't know he was going to be here."

But suddenly, the demon got quiet again.

"Phoebe, the spell," Piper said, holding out her hand to her sister.

"Okay, I'll tell you," the demon replied rather easily.

Piper knew that was the benefit of dealing with minions. They very rarely had loyalty to their masters when faced with imminent death, and could always be counted on to squeal like demonic pigs.

"We went after the kid after we lost the first Firestarter," the demon said.

"The guy that jumped off the Golden Gate?" Phoebe asked for clarification.

The demon nodded his head. "He didn't know that we knew where he lived . . . well, *when* he lived, that is." He laughed at his own little joke. "He did a bunch of research finding the other Elementals, including the kid. Apparently, he wanted to have a backup in case something happened to him. Good planning, eh?"

He waited for a response, but there was none.

"Was really organized too," the minion continued. "Told us everything we needed to know about the other three Elementals and the little Firestarter."

"Except that Tyler's powers were bound," Piper said, mentally confirming what they had already suspected about there being three other Elementals.

"Yeah, he left that part out," the demon replied. "But I found that out this morning when

I tried to drain the kid. Nothing happened."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Piper said, checking out his bruise. "Looks like you managed to get a good wallop in the head, if you ask me."

The demon sneered at her.

"After the kid got away," he continued, "we went back to the file. Like I said, it was pretty thorough and listed a bunch of places we might find the little guy. This was the first place we figured he'd go, so we put a guard on the house. When she saw smoke coming out the window, she figured you'd unbound the kid's powers, so we attacked."

"Yeah, we were here for that part," Paige said.

"Where can we find Tempest?" Leo asked, cutting to the chase.

Once again, the demon clamped his mouth shut.

Piper knew the threat of the spell would only work so many times. "What about the other Elementals. Where are they?"

"I'd rather die," the demon said.

"That can be arranged," Piper threatened. She considered asking him where the Circle of Gaea was located, but she knew he wouldn't answer and she didn't want to deal with the attitude she would get from him when he found out they didn't know.

"Anything else you want to know?" the demon asked her, smugly. "I've got all day."

"Actually, you don't," Piper said, suspecting that the demon would stall for the rest of the

afternoon if they let him. "And neither do we. . . . Phoebe."

Phoebe held out the paper as she, Piper, and Paige read aloud:

This one's going down
Only three more to go.
Then Tempest will frown,
As we vanquish our foe.

The demon let out a horrible scream that echoed through the house as he exploded in a colorful light show. Conveniently, the window was already open—and smashed, too—so the smoke from the burning demon blew away quickly.

"Then Tempest will frown?" Paige asked, skeptically.

"Hey, it was all I could come up with on short notice," Phoebe replied. "I said it wasn't my best work."

Piper watched the last of the demon smoke fly out the window and noticed that it was beginning to rain. "We should cover that or something, before all the rain comes in."

"I'll take care of it," Leo said. He was used to making quick patches around the house, what with the tendency of uninvited guests toward smashing the place up. "But first, how are we going to find the rest of the Elementals?"

"I have an idea about that," Piper replied. "Meet us downstairs when you're done."

Chapter 7

It was all Darryl could do not to jump when he heard the blood-curdling scream echo through the house. He assumed that the demon was no more, although he hadn't expected the big, hulking man to scream like a little girl as he was vanquished.

"What was that?" Tyler asked as he jumped up off the couch and turned toward the scream.

"My assumption is that man who came after you this morning will never come after you again," Darryl replied.

"Good," Tyler said softly as he sat back down.

Darryl sat in silence with Tyler for a moment, wondering what the next course of action would be. Just because one of Tempest's followers was taken care of didn't mean it was safe to take Tyler home yet. He also wondered if that scream could be heard on the street. They certainly didn't

need anyone else to come poking around.

"Maybe we can go back upstairs now," Tyler suggested.

"That's okay," Piper said. "We thought we'd bring the party to you."

The Charmed Ones filled Darryl and Tyler in on what little they had learned upstairs. It only took a moment, and had Darryl worrying once again what their next move would be.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked. "How do we find the Elementals?"

"Tyler," Piper said. "Did I ever tell you about scrying?"

"Is that where you use the crystal and the map to find someone?" Tyler asked. "Paige showed me how when Britney Spears was in town."

All the adults in the room shot Paige a look.

"What? He's a preteen boy, who else would he want to locate?" she said, defending her actions and choice of person to scry.

"Don't you need a personal object or something to do that?" Darryl asked. He had watched the Charmed Ones scry on occasion.

"He had her CD," Paige said. "It was good enough."

"No, I meant with the Elementals," Darryl said with a laugh.

"Oh," Paige simply replied.

"I was thinking that Tyler must have a connection to the other Elementals," Piper said. "We

could work with him to scry their locations and go meet them."

"And tell them that if they don't come with us to some secret destination in the middle of the night that the world as we know it will come to an end?" Phoebe asked.

"Something like that," Piper replied.

"Just checking," Phoebe said. "Sounds like a plan to me."

"We have a plan?" Leo asked as he joined the group.

"The beginning of one," Piper replied.

"This should just take a moment," Paige said as she unfolded the map of San Francisco on the coffee table in front of Tyler and held out the scrying crystal. "Now, Tyler, I want you to hold on to this crystal and dangle it over the map."

Tyler took the chain that Paige held out to him and moved the crystal on the end over to the coffee table as instructed.

"Great," Piper said as she put her hand on top of his. "We'll do this together. Think of it like a Ouija board. Just let your hand drift over the map, and the stone will guide you where it wants to go." She let Tyler guide as both their hands hovered over the map, moving in a circular motion.

"Like this?" Tyler asked.

"Perfect," Paige replied. "If we're lucky this should only take—"

The crystal dropped on the map.

"Did I do it right?" Tyler asked, looking over his shoulder at Paige.

"Well, sort of," Paige replied as she leaned down over the map. "You found yourself."

Since Darryl was the closest to the map, he leaned in and saw that the scrying crystal had, in fact, landed directly on Halliwell Manor. "It's a start," he said encouragingly. "Now just find the other three."

Darryl could see a look of frustration briefly cross Tyler's face, but he had to give the kid props for pulling the chain back up and swinging it over the map once again without a grumble or a complaint. It was bad enough that Darryl had to deal with all this crazy magic stuff as an adult; he couldn't imagine going through it all at Tyler's age.

It took a few minutes, but Tyler and Paige managed to drop the scrying crystal on three more points on the map of San Francisco. Naturally, the other three Elementals had to currently be spread across the city.

The first drop of the scrying crystal—after it had located Tyler—landed on a building in the financial district. Considering that it was already Saturday afternoon, Darryl figured that there would be less people in that area to get in the way, which was lucky. The second location appeared to be an elementary school in Stonestown, though Darryl couldn't imagine who would be in a school on Saturday other

than maybe the janitorial staff. The third location took the longest to find, and it wound up being San Francisco General Hospital. Darryl hoped they hadn't found some bedridden patient, since he or she would have a difficult time getting out to the Circle of Gaea, wherever that may be.

"Looks like we're going to have to split up," Phoebe said.

"I'm with Piper!" Tyler announced, which didn't come as a surprise. Darryl noticed that the boy seemed to gravitate to that sister over the others, in spite of the fact that Paige was his social worker. Once this was all over, he intended to ask how Tyler came into their lives in the first place. But that was a story for a different time.

"Actually, I'm thinking you should be with Darryl," Piper said. "Is that okay?"

Darryl realized she was posing the question to him and not Tyler. "Fine with me, but I don't think we can stay here all afternoon." He crossed to the window, peered out, and saw what he had expected. "Harkins has a car posted outside. I don't know if it's here to watch the house or to follow me, but either way it's going to look suspicious if I spend the day doing nothing but sitting in your house while the kid I'm supposed to be looking for is right next to me."

"Good point," Leo said. "Is there some kind of safe house you could take him to?"

"The only one that wouldn't raise any questions would be my own home," Darryl said.

That response was met by silence. It was obvious that Leo and the Charmed Ones were reluctant to bring that kind of threat straight to Darryl's family, but he knew that there was no other option.

"Little Darryl is with his grandparents for the night," Darryl explained. "So only Sheila's at the house. If those demons only found Tyler here because your address was in some guy's notes, then the odds of them finding my place are slim."

"But what if they're watching the Manor right now?" Paige asked. "They could follow you home and attack."

"I've followed enough people in my life to know how to lose a tail," Darryl said. "Besides, there'd be no reason to follow me, since I won't be seen leaving the house with Tyler."

"You'll need me to orb him to your place," Leo said, catching on.

"Actually, I need you to do something else," Piper said. "Paige will have to do the orbing."

"Fine with me," Paige said as she gave Tyler a smile. "And maybe we can stop off on the way and pick up some clothes for you. Unless you're okay with being in your pajamas all day?"

"Clothes would be nice," Tyler agreed.

"Just be careful," Phoebe warned. "His picture's probably all over the place by now."

"I am nothing if not the queen of stealth," Paige replied.

"So, what do you need me to do?" Leo asked his wife.

"Go to the Elders and see if you can pry the location of the Circle of Gaea from them," she replied. "I figure if they get back to you with their usual lightning-quick response, then you shouldn't be any longer than all afternoon."

A lightning bolt struck off in the distance, as if in response to her sarcasm. Darryl noticed that the storm was getting more intense, which would make it easier for him to lose a tail if he got one.

As the Charmed Ones divvied up the locations of the Elementals, Darryl took another look out the window. The sedan was still parked across the street, with the FBI agents inside making no effort to blend in with the surroundings. Since they wanted to be seen, Darryl assumed that they were just watching the house in case Tyler showed up. He continued checking the street for any other watchful eyes, but saw nothing out of the ordinary through the rain, though he wondered if the demons following them had the power to make themselves invisible. Again, these were the kinds of things he hadn't had to worry about when he was fresh out of the Academy.

"So we've got a plan," Darryl said as he turned back into the room. "I'll go out first. Piper, you and Phoebe should wait a few minutes before you go to your cars so it doesn't look

like we're all leaving at once. The agents will probably keep watching the house, especially if they think Paige is still inside."

"You don't think they might come to the door?" Paige asked.

"Well, they don't know that you didn't already leave before they got here," Darryl said. "When you and Tyler orb over, meet me in the garage. I think Sheila will have fewer questions if I come in with him instead of you bringing him to me."

"Got it," Paige said, giving a little mock salute.

Tyler, however, looked a little tentative about leaving the Charmed Ones.

"Hey, Tyler," Darryl said. "You'll like it at my place. I've got Gamecube and a ton of games."

"Do you have SSX3?" Tyler asked, his eyes practically bugging out.

Darryl smiled and nodded.

Suddenly, Tyler looked quite eager to get there.

Darryl wished the ladies and Leo luck and made his way out of the house after promising to keep his cell phone open should they need him and Tyler to get somewhere on a moment's notice. As he stepped out into the rain, he did another quick check up and down the block, but only saw the agents' car. He gave them a little wave as he got into his own car and wasn't surprised when they waved back, confirming that

they did want to have their presence known.

When Darryl pulled away, he was glad to see that the agents didn't follow him. It would be hard enough trying to convince his wife to hide a missing child at the house without having to do it directly under the eyes of the FBI. So much for their romantic evening.

Even though Darryl didn't notice anyone—or any demon—following them, he still took a circuitous route, winding through the streets of San Francisco. He purposely took three times longer to get home than he normally would, giving Paige enough time to orb Tyler into some new clothes first. He wasn't surprised at all to find them waiting in the garage when he got there.

"Take the long way?" Paige asked softly as Darryl got out of the car.

Darryl knew they didn't have to whisper since the garage was not attached to the house, but he didn't want to tempt fate either way, so he spoke in soft tones as well. "I'm pretty sure I wasn't followed. I think we're okay here."

"Here, take this in case," Paige said as she handed him a potion bottle. "If a demon should show up, throw it and duck. It should take care of him."

"What if there's more than one?" Darryl asked as he examined the bottle with the red liquid inside.

"Run," Paige replied. "We only had enough ingredients to make the one bottle."

Darryl carefully pocketed the potion, not wanting to risk breaking the one magical defense he had against attack. Once he was sure it was safe, he turned his attention to Tyler, who looked much calmer than he had at the Manor. "Hey, Tyler, nice threads."

"Thanks," Tyler replied. He looked like he'd stepped straight out of a Gap Kids ad.

"I don't think we've really thanked you for this," Paige said.

She was about to say more, but Darryl silenced her by raising his hand. He looked down at Tyler, who epitomized the word "innocence."

"Just doing my job," Darryl said.

Chapter 8

"I believe you forgot something," Tempest said as three of his four minions appeared at his feet.

The female minion stepped forward, leaving her partners silently behind her, where Tempest suspected they really preferred to stay.

"We were overpowered," she said. "The Charmed Ones were . . . powerful."

"Yes," Tempest said. "*Overpowerful,* apparently. Why did it take you so long to get back? They could not possibly have been overpowering you for an hour."

"We did not want to return empty-handed," she explained.

"And yet you did."

"Once we fled the house, we waited outside and watched for an opportunity to strike again."

Well, at least what they lack in intelligence, they make up for with dedication, Tempest thought.

"I take it that opportunity never arose?" he asked.

The female seemed reluctant to speak. She looked back to the others, but they provided no support whatsoever.

"We saw a man and two of the witches leave the house," she explained. "We thought that left only two adults with the Firestarter."

"And?"

"When we were teleported back inside, the house was empty," she continued, hardly masking the confusion in her voice. "We searched from top to bottom, but it was like they disappeared."

"Maybe because they did," Tempest suggested.

"Yes, master," she said. "We humbly apologize."

"Stop!" Tempest said as the three minions started to bow. "We're wasting time. Move on to the next phase of the plan. Once you collect the powers from the other Elementals you can go back for the Firestarter."

"Yes, master," the female said as she and the big guys looked up at their leader in awe of his plan.

"Well . . . go."

Once Paige had turned Tyler over to Darryl, she orbed to the Stonestown section of San Francisco and right into the auditorium of Woodrow

Wilson Elementary School. Her mind was immediately whisked back to her own childhood when she saw the auditorium seats, so obviously designed for the comfort of children instead of adults. There were so many mornings when she had sat at her old school assemblies saying the Pledge of Allegience and singing silly songs, like "Happy Talk" or "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'." Now that she was an adult, she feared that she would never sing about corn being as high as an elephant's eye again in her life.

That might not be such a horrible thing, she thought.

Paige had intentionally orbed herself into a back corner of the auditorium in case there was some kind of special event taking place that would have brought the Elemental to school on a Saturday. The place was conveniently empty, which would make finding her charge much easier. She left the auditorium in search of the person, checking out the impressive building as she went.

The school was one of the newer ones in the city and hadn't fallen into that state of disrepair that, sadly, more and more schools were getting into these days. Wilson Elementary was definitely one of the more affluent public schools in the city. Paige was always amazed at the differences in public education within the same school system. It moved her to think that most of the kids she dealt with in social services would

never have this kind of education simply because of the part of the city their parents had chosen to live in. Okay, she knew that she was jumping to conclusions without really knowing the school, but when she peeked into the room full of brand new Apple G4 computers, it sent her head spinning.

She was considering orbing into the locked room to check things out when the sound of a crash from down the hall reminded her why she was at the school in the first place. Paige took off down the hall, but was careful not to run directly into the commotion. Her caution was rewarded when a chair came flying out of a classroom and just missed her head. If she had been only one step ahead of herself, she would probably be unconscious on the cold, yet sparkling clean, floor.

Paige exercised even more caution as she peeked into the classroom and took in the situation.

The place was unlike any classroom that she had had in her childhood. First of all, there were no desks on the carpeted floor. There were a few chairs and a stack of mats along the multi-colored wall. The only desk in the room was the teacher's, and that looked more like it was from Ikea than from any warehouse that specialized in those big, wooden school desks that looked like they weighed a thousand pounds. This desk seemed rather flimsy by comparison—a fact that

concerned Paige, because there was a man trying to hide behind it and shield himself from a demon attack.

I'm guessing that's my Elemental, she thought.

Paige considered her options. The demon's back was to her, so she thought about rushing him, but he was a pretty big demon. Her sisters had already warned her about using her powers against him. She certainly didn't want to give him the power to orb her down to the boiler room—not that she thought this high-tech school had an actual boiler in it.

As she watched the demon approach the teacher's flimsy desk, she saw the pile of mats fly toward the hulking behemoth.

"No!" she called out, trying to warn the man against using his powers, but it was already too late. Her yell did distract the demon, however, and as he turned toward her, he was buried under a pile of padded mats.

Paige ran past the demon who was stuck under the mats and joined the man behind the desk. She had been concerned about it protecting one person, but knew that it was not substantial enough to keep the two of them safe.

"Hi, I'm Paige," she said as she watched the demon dig himself out from under the mats. "And I'll be your rescuer today."

"Thanks," the man said. "I'm Raphael, but my rescuer can call me Rafe. Who is that man? And why is he trying to kill me?"

"Long story," she replied. "We have to get you out of here."

"I've got to get these animals out of here," he said.

"Animals?" Paige asked. For the first time she noticed that the far wall was lined with cages and terrariums filled with small critters ranging from iguanas to what looked to be possums. She did appreciate the guy's concern for the critters, but they weren't the ones in danger. "What kind of class *is* this?"

Paige didn't have time to find out the answer to her question because the demon had managed to extricate himself entirely from the pile and was moving toward them menacingly.

"We can come back for the animals," Paige said. "But we should get someplace safer."

"I'll create a diversion," Rafe said as he shut his eyes to concentrate.

"Wait," she warned, but once again it was too late. Paige watched as the demon was pelted by chalk.

"Run!" Rafe said as he dashed out from behind the desk and past the demon.

Paige had no choice but to follow. She hunched down, bracing herself for the demon's counterattack, but none came.

"This way," Rafe said once they were out in the hall. He ran in the direction that Paige had come, back to the auditorium. "Now can you tell me who's after me . . . and why?"

"It's a demon," Paige said as they ran.

"A demon?" Rafe repeated, unsure that he had heard her correctly. "You mean an actual demon?"

"Yeah," Paige replied as they passed the computer room. "Demons are real. Look, you can't use your powers against it."

"So you figured out I'm telekinetic," Rafe said. "What tipped you off?"

"Oh, you're more than that," Paige replied. "But we'll get to that later. Just don't use your powers. It could make things worse."

"But I didn't have a problem a minute ago," Rafe said.

"Yeah, I wonder why that was?" Paige thought out loud. They finally reached the auditorium. Paige looked back to see that the demon wasn't following them yet and figured he was still fighting off the chalk missiles.

"Please tell me what's going on," Rafe said as they entered the auditorium. He led her down to the stage.

"In a minute," Paige replied. She needed his full attention while they dealt with the demon and figured if she got into the whole explanation of him being an Elemental and having to save the world right now, she would probably lose some of his focus on the immediate situation. "Where are we going?"

"It's like a maze backstage," Rafe said. "I figure whoever this guy is will give up looking for us after a while."

"Fat chance," Paige said as they darted across the stage. "What happened before I got here? And what are you doing in school on a Saturday?"

"One of my student's parents works at the zoo," Rafe explained as he led Paige through the backstage area, past smaller classrooms and storage areas. "She lent us all the animals you saw in my room for the week. I came in to pick up the cages and return them to the zoo. Had to wait for the weekend so I could borrow my friend's truck."

"And that's when the demon attacked?" Paige asked.

"You keep saying demon," Rafe said, incredulous about the information. "What? Like Satan's minion or something?"

"Minion, yes. Satan, not so much," Paige said, trying to keep the conversation on track. She didn't blame him for the confusion. It was a lot to take in. "Anyway, did he use some kind of power on you?"

"No," Rafe said. "He just threatened me with his big bulky body. I considered fighting him off, but did you see the size of his arms?"

"Yeah," Paige said. The guy was impressive, but she knew her sisters had already taken the demon on once that day. She chose to leave that part out, in deference to the feelings of the guy she was trying to save.

"At first I thought he was a mugger," he said.

"But who would mug a teacher? And in the middle of a second-grade classroom, no less."

Paige looked around the room he had led her into. It was a computer graveyard, and had a number of dead pieces of expensive-looking equipment. She tried to focus on the "computer" aspect of the room and ignore the "graveyard" part.

"Oh, I know the school looks impressive," Rafe said, reading her mind. "But I'm still a public school teacher. Not a mugger's prime target."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't trying to get your wallet," Paige said.

"We should be safe down here," Rafe said. "So who are you, exactly?"

"I was sent to protect you," Paige said as she took in the dark room. "How am I doing so far?"

"Depends," Rafe said. "I'm not dead yet, so let's chalk that up as a positive."

"We need to figure out how to defend ourselves in here," Paige said. "Demons always have a way of find—"

The door exploded inward, cutting Paige off as it slammed into her and knocked her to the ground.

"I don't have time for this!" the demon yelled as he reached for Rafe.

Paige watched as Rafe, out of fear or habit, focused on the demon in the same way that Tyler focused on bringing forth his fire. Before she could say anything, the demon held out his

hand and a sky blue energy flowed out of Rafe's body toward the demon. She saw Rafe's mask of concentration break and turn into a look of shock.

The demon was draining his power.

"Here's a little snack," Sheila Morris said as she put a bowl of microwave macaroni and cheese along with a juice box in front of Tyler, who was sitting at the kitchen table. "Enjoy. Darryl and I will be out in the living room if you need us."

Darryl knew he was in for it. He had only given Sheila a brief—and carefully highlighted—explanation of the chain of events that led him to secretly bring a missing child into their home. He knew that Sheila wouldn't cause a problem in front the boy, but now that she had gotten him out of the way with a quick meal, Darryl knew he was in for it.

"Now, let me explain before you go off on me," Darryl said with a lighthearted smile as his wife joined him in the living room.

"Don't you smile at me," Sheila said, calmly. "Who are these people looking for Tyler?"

"It has to do with his past," Darryl said, choosing his words carefully. He had no problem *concealing* the truth from her, but it was the outright lying that he wasn't comfortable doing. "Before he was adopted."

"So, what? Evil foster parents?" Sheila asked.

"Something like that," Darryl agreed, going

with the easiest route of explanation. "It's just too dangerous for him to go home right now."

"So you brought him here?" Sheila asked. Her tone was subdued. She wasn't angry with her husband, just confused. "What if Darryl Junior was home?"

"Then I would have brought him somewhere else," Darryl said. "This was the safest place I could think of."

"Safer than the police station?" Sheila asked, taking a seat on the couch. "Darryl, what's going on?"

"Nothing," he said, coming the closest to a lie that he was comfortable telling. "Nothing at all for you to worry about." He considered sitting beside her on the couch, but decided to remain standing and maintain a safe distance. His wife could be a formidable woman when she got riled.

"But I do worry," Sheila said. "And not just because I'm the wife of a cop. Things have gotten weird around here since Andy died."

Darryl knew what she was talking about. His partner's death was roughly around the time he found out that the world, as he knew it, didn't really exist. Instead, the planet was full of magical creatures waging a war between good and evil, and his city was one of the fronts in that battle, and his friends were major players.

"What's weird about a missing child?" Darryl asked.

"You bringing him home with you," Sheila replied.

"You're the only one who can bring work home?" Darryl asked, making a lame attempt at a joke.

Sheila only smiled slightly as she shook her head in resignation. "I don't suppose the Halliwells are involved in this somehow."

It was all Darryl could do to maintain his neutral expression and not reveal his shock. Sheila was much more in tune to events than he had suspected. It shouldn't have surprised him. She was an amazing woman.

"Darryl, if I go in there and ask Tyler if he knows Piper, Phoebe, and Paige, what will he say?" Sheila asked, getting up from the couch and approaching her husband.

"That you are one good detective," Darryl replied.

"Don't try to butter me up," Sheila said. "Tell me what's going on."

"I would, honey," Darryl said. "But it's not my secret to tell. And right now I need to focus on keeping that boy safe. Can we please leave this discussion for some other time?"

"Okay," Sheila agreed. "But don't you think I'm going to forget about this."

"I love you," Darryl said.

"You'd better," Sheila replied with a laugh as they kissed.

Their brief moment of romance was interrupted when Darryl's cell phone rang. He took

the phone off his belt and reluctantly pulled out of his kiss. The display on the phone indicated that it was the chief calling, probably for a status report.

"Hey, chief," Darryl answered as he stepped out to the hall. "What's up?"

"That's what I was wondering," the chief replied over the phone. "Are you coordinating things with the FBI? I heard you left the crime scene."

"Yeah," Darryl said, assuming the chief meant that he heard that Darryl had left the scene without coordinating with Harkins. He tried to lower his voice so Sheila wouldn't hear him. "I had to stop by the house on the way to check out a lead."

"I just got a report that the crime scene investigators found some blood on a bat the kid kept in his room," the chief said. "Looks like it *is* a kidnapping. I need you to meet Harkins back at the scene ASAP."

Darryl tried to come up with some excuse to explain his potential delay, but nothing was coming. "I'll be there as soon as I check out this lead."

"Well, make it quick," the chief said. "Keep me posted."

Darryl hit the END button on his phone and walked back to the living room, where he found Sheila standing with her arms crossed, staring at him. He immediately regretted not taking the call in another part of the house entirely.

"Your boss doesn't even know that you found the kid?" Sheila asked.

"Look, it's complicated," Darryl said. "I can't get too many people involved.

"At least tell me his parents know that their son is being protected," she said.

Darryl's silence gave her the answer.

"Those people are probably worried sick," Sheila said. "How can you have their child here and let them worry like that?"

"I said it was complicated," he replied, trying to figure out how much of the story he could share.

"That is not acceptable," Sheila said. "You get back there and tell them their son is safe. I'll watch Tyler."

At that moment Tyler just happened into the room. "Are you going somewhere?" he asked, the concern showing in his voice.

"Darryl's going to let your parent's know you're okay," Sheila said as she moved over to the boy and put a calming hand on his shoulder. "He won't be gone long."

Darryl knew that he really didn't have a choice in the matter. Aside from the fact that his wife was putting her foot down, he didn't want to put his job in jeopardy either. Besides, an appearance at the crime scene would go a long way toward making his actions look less suspicious. Naturally, he had to weigh all those facts against leaving his wife unprotected and

unaware of the kind of danger Tyler was in.

"Did you finish your snack?" Darryl asked the boy.

"I wasn't very hungry," Tyler replied, which Darryl understood.

"I'm just going to talk to him before I go," Darryl told Sheila as he took Tyler back to the kitchen.

"Do you have to go?" Tyler asked.

"I won't be long," Darryl said. "But I think I do need to stop by your house. At least to let your parents know that you're alive. It's just something I need to do."

"I think you do too," Tyler reluctantly admitted. "Your wife sounded mad."

"Not mad, just strong-willed," Darryl said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle Paige had given him. "Take this potion for protection. You should be safe here, but in case a demon comes in, throw it at him, then grab Sheila and run. I need you to look after my wife for me, okay?"

"Okay," Tyler said, looking a little more comfortable with the idea that he had been given some responsibility. Having a weapon didn't hurt either.

"Remember," Darryl warned. "Don't use your powers unless you really have to." He went back out to the living room to tell Sheila that she'd won. She was already holding his jacket for him.

"Be careful," Sheila said as she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Don't open the door for anyone you don't know," Darryl said, doubting that demons would use the door to get in. "And if someone gets in the house, don't try to be a hero. Just grab Tyler and go."

"I love you," she said as she pushed him to the door.

"I love you too," he replied, worrying that he was making a huge mistake.

Chapter 9

Phoebe pulled her car off Twenty-third Street and into the San Francisco General Hospital parking garage. It took her several loops up the different levels to find an empty spot, which did not bode well for her finding her Elemental quickly once she got in the building. Considering this was only *one* of the parking areas for the hospital—which consisted of numerous buildings over several city blocks—Phoebe knew there would be plenty of innocents to choose from.

She got out of the car and took the elevator down to ground level, where she dashed across the street to keep from getting too drenched. She knew she should have changed out of her short skirt before going out in this weather, but she really didn't have the time.

The hospital lobby was buzzing with people.

Phoebe considered asking for help at the information desk but she worried that she'd be sent to the psych ward if she asked if they knew if anyone with the power to control the elements was on the premises.

Phoebe bypassed the lobby, heading down a long hall to her right toward the emergency room. She figured that was as good a place as any to start, and an even better place to wind up should one of Tempest's demons attack. The problem was, she still didn't have an idea how she was going to locate the Elemental.

She briefly considered touching everyone she passed, hoping that one of them showed her a future with Tyler in it. But that plan had several flaws. First of all, she couldn't just go around touching every single person in the hospital. Then there was the possible problem of seeing other people's futures that could distract her from her mission. On top of that, a hospital was not exactly the kind of place where you want to go touching potentially germ-filled people.

As she reached the ER, Phoebe passed a large tropical fish tank set into the wall. The search narrowed when she saw the water in the tank swirling in a violent whirlpool, sending the fish in circles at dizzying speeds. Phoebe looked through the water and saw a slightly frazzled African-American woman in a lab coat flipping through some charts.

"Bingo!" Phoebe said as she walked to the

door and into the room. The place looked like some kind of waiting room, and it was conveniently empty except for the woman.

"Excuse me," Phoebe asked. "Can you help me?"

"Admitting is down the hall," the woman said without looking up from her charts.

"That's not the kind of help I had in mind," Phoebe said, checking the fish tank. The water was swirling even faster. The doctor was still not looking up. "I was wondering if you were doing that?"

"Doing what?" the doctor asked, still refusing to look up.

"That," Phoebe said, taking the doctor's arm and pointing her in the direction of the tank.

The doctor looked at the water and hardly reacted to its weird motion. "Sorry. Don't know what you're talking about." She returned her attention to the paperwork.

"Yeah," Phoebe said. "For some reason I don't believe you, doc."

"Look, Miss," the woman said exasperatedly. "I'm not officially a doctor yet, I'm a med student . . . a very busy med student. I don't really have time to stop and watch the fish swim by."

"Do you have the time to stop and save the world?" Phoebe asked, finally getting the woman's attention. She knew this because the water came to a dramatic halt. "That's better. I'm Phoebe Halliwell. And you are?"

"Gabrielle," the med student replied. "Gabrielle Chambers. What do you mean, save the world?"

"Let's start at the beginning," Phoebe said, taking a seat. "How long have you been able to control water?"

"Control water?" the woman said, sitting beside her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look I—we—don't have time for games," Phoebe said.

"No, honestly," Gabrielle said. "I really *don't* know what you're talking about. All my life I've been comfortable around the water. I love to swim and surf and go boating. And yeah, every now and then I notice weird things happening, like the water in the tank just now. But I'm not *controlling* it."

Phoebe didn't know where to begin. It was one thing to tell the woman she had to use her power to save the world, it was quite another to have to start from scratch and tell her that she had a power that she could use to save the world.

"Although that does explain that time I walked on water," Gabrielle said. "I just thought I was on a sandbar out in the ocean. Now you're telling me that I did that? I can make the water do what I want . . . like Aquaman?"

"Actually, I think he just tells the fish what to do," Phoebe replied. "But yeah, you can make water do what you want it to do."

"Wow," Gabrielle said.

Phoebe let the woman sit silently for a moment to absorb the impact of what she had just learned.

"Well, I gotta get back to work," Gabrielle said as she got back up.

"Wait a second," Phoebe said. "That's it? You just found out you have a magical power and that's it?"

"Phoebe," Gabrielle said. "I'm a thirty-six-year-old medical student. I don't have the time to sit and think things over right now. I'll worry about my magical power when my shift is over . . . sometime next week."

"Thirty-six-year-old med student?" Phoebe said. "And I thought I waited too long to start a career . . . that I'm going to be stuck in for the rest of my life."

"This is career number two," Gabrielle said. "I was a lawyer in my twenties."

"You went from being a lawyer to being a doctor?" Phoebe asked.

"Technically, I'm not a doctor yet," Gabrielle reminded her. "Which is why I'll deal with this later. I've got work to do right now. Thanks for the news."

"Actually, there's more," Phoebe said, trying to get back to the whole "saving the world" thing.

"Sorry," Gabrielle said. "I just don't have time for 'more.'"

As Gabrielle started toward the door, a chair came crashing through the tank, sending water and tropical fish all over the floor.

Phoebe looked through the broken glass to see one of the demons standing in the hall.

Piper reached the glass doors of the bank and pulled, knowing that they would be locked. She was right. The sign on the door indicated that the bank had closed an hour earlier.

"Stupid Saturday hours," she mumbled to herself as she tried to stay dry under the small overhang. The rain was coming down harder, and the sky was so dark it almost appeared as if it was already night.

Piper banged against the glass door, worried that her Elemental may have left. She peered inside, but the place looked entirely empty.

"Hello!" she called out as she banged on the glass once again. "Is anybody in there?"

This time, her knocking was rewarded when she saw an older woman come out of an office in the back. She looked to be in her mid-sixties and was dressed in a very professional dark blue suit.

It took the woman almost a minute to get across the huge bank lobby, during which time Piper got more and more soaked by the rain. She used the delay to test her speech out in her mind. She thought, for some reason, it might be difficult to convince the woman that she had to come along with her to stop a demon from controlling the weather and taking over the world. Although Piper was getting more and more used to telling people weird magical truths.

When the woman reached the door, she unlocked it without hesitation and let the soaking wet stranger into the bank. Piper knew this was not standard bank operating procedure.

"I almost gave up hope on you showing up," the woman said. "It's getting late."

"I'm sorry," Piper said as she stepped into the dry bank. The air was much cooler inside, causing her to shiver in her wet clothes. "I don't think I'm the person you were expecting."

"Well, that depends," the woman said. "Is your name Piper, Phoebe, or Paige?"

Well, that was unexpected, Piper thought.

"Ummm . . . Piper," she replied, unsure of how the woman had known she was coming when she herself didn't even know until a short time ago.

"Then you're exactly the person I was expecting," the woman said.

"How did you know I was coming?"

The woman smiled. "First things first. I assume you have the young Firestarter under your protection, correct?"

Piper was just getting more and more confused by this strange woman. "Yes," she said.

"Very good," the woman said. "Then we're halfway to performing the Ritual of the Guardians." She handed Piper a handkerchief to wipe her face.

Chapter 10

"Paige . . . help . . . ," Rafe said in a strained voice as his power continued to be drained from his body.

Paige wondered why the demon hadn't drained Rafe's power when he'd used it earlier. She didn't have much time to think it over as Rafe's knees buckled and he fell to the ground. Luckily, she came up with a possible solution rather quickly. She figured it was safe to orb so she popped herself behind the demon and kicked him in the weak spot in the back of his knees.

The demon stumbled and broke his hold on Rafe, which snapped the blue light in two. Rafe looked a little weak, but he was able to stand.

"Try to use your power on the computers," she said, pointing to the cabinet over the demon.

Rafe got the idea and focused on the shelves.

The computers started to shake slowly as his strength came back to him. A moment later the dead computers were tumbling down on the demon. Paige used the distraction to grab Rafe and flee the room.

"I thought you didn't want me to use my powers," Rafe said, conveniently forgetting that he'd used them a minute earlier even though she had told him not to.

"I think the demon can only drain your power when you use it on him directly," Paige explained as they made their way back to the auditorium. "But that doesn't mean you can't fling as many things at him as you can get your mind on."

"I've got an idea," Rafe said. "This way."

Rafe led her down the hall to the left of the auditorium. Paige considered simply orbing them back to the house, but the demon would probably just follow her there. She knew she had to find a way to take care of him here and now so she could get Rafe to safety.

"So, you were saying I'm not really telekinetic?" Rafe asked as they continued to run down the hall.

Paige had to give the guy credit for his ability to walk and chew gum at the same time—or, in this case, to run for his life and carry on a conversation.

"Actually," Paige said as they turned a corner and ran down a flight of steps in the seemingly

endless school, "you're what's known as an Elemental."

"Okay," Rafe said, absorbing her words. "So, what's the difference between being telekinetic and being an . . ."

"Elemental."

"Yeah . . . that."

They burst through a set of wooden doors, and Paige was surprised to find that they were in the school gym. At first she wondered why he had taken her to the big room with nothing to hide behind, but then she saw the equipment locker. It was already standing open and littered with possible weapons. Images of past dodgeball games came to mind, and she and Rafe ran to the locker to prepare for battle.

"Telekinesis is a whole mind-over-matter thing," Paige explained as they pulled everything out of the locker. "What *you* do is use your emotions to control the winds to lift and move things. You're not moving the objects so much as letting them ride the wind currents you create."

"Really?" Rafe said, sounding impressed with himself. "So I could, like, fly if I wanted to?"

"Yep. You, like, could do that," she replied, making fun of the teacher.

Paige was just one flip of the hair away from flirting with the guy, but she realized that and stopped herself. She hadn't had the best luck with men lately, particularly ones that got involved in her magical life. She decided to

keep this relationship on the professional level, in spite of his brilliant blue eyes and jet black hair.

"And what did that demon do to me in the computer dumping ground?" Rafe asked.

"He was trying to steal your power," Paige said. She had just pulled out some kind of oddly shaped disk that she couldn't begin to imagine a purpose for.

"Why?"

Isn't that just the all-important question, Paige thought to herself.

"We'll get to that in a minute," she said. "First we need to take care of him."

The slightly battered demon had just burst through the doors. He froze when he saw Paige and Rafe standing among piles and piles of weapons.

Paige didn't give the demon a chance to think as she started orbing stuff over his head and dropping it on him.

Rafe took her cue and started using his control over the wind to fling bats, balls, and whatever else he could wrap his emotions around.

Darryl drove to the Michaels's home hoping that he would be able to get in and out quickly with a minimum of commotion. Once he turned the corner of their block, he realized that would not be the case. In addition to several squad cars from his precinct as well as several FBI cars,

there were also several news vans littering the street. The case had somehow gone from simple kidnapping to full media event.

Just what we need, Darryl thought.

Various members of the media were camped in the middle of the street interviewing neighbors and the dozens of people who just came by to witness real news in the making. They all seemed unfazed by the heavy rainfall pelting them, not wanting to miss out on their chance to be part of the story.

Uniformed officers had taped off the area to keep the people back. Darryl would have had to show ID just to get his car on the street, but the officer recognized him and waved him through. It had not looked like this at all when Darryl had left, and that was probably why the chief had called him and politely pointed out that he really needed to be there.

Darryl was always amazed by the public's interest in certain missing child cases. He knew for a fact that kids went missing every day across the U.S., but rarely did they warrant such media attention. Once Darryl thought about it, though, he wasn't really surprised. Tyler's case had the markings of one of those media blitzes—recently adopted Caucasian child in a semi-affluent neighborhood goes missing in the early morning . . . a bloody bat found at the scene. Granted, Darryl knew there was only a *trace* amount of blood on the bat, but by the time it

made the news that important fact would somehow be dropped from the script.

Darryl double-parked his car, since no traffic was currently going up or down the street, and got out. He tried his best to shield himself from the rain, but it was practically blowing sideways at times. He surveyed the situation, hoping he could get in and out with a minimum of fuss, but suspected that was going to be impossible.

Harkins was holding court with various members of the press under one of those hastily erected party tents on the patio—the kind that was just poles supporting a roof. Darryl was glad that the Feds were involved because he never would have been able to disappear had he been lead investigator on the case.

Darryl flashed his badge to one of the agents at the bottom of the stairs and was waved on. He hurried up the stairs, bypassing press and only giving a quick nod in Harkins's direction as he went into the house. Darryl hoped that he could get this over with before Harkins was done with the press.

The atmosphere was only slightly calmer in the house, where several agents were keeping busy hovering around the concerned parents. Mr. Michaels had apparently decided that the situation was enough of an emergency to warrant a smoke break, as he was about to light up when Darryl stepped into the foyer.

"Inspector Morris," Mrs. Michaels said with

what sounded like relief in her voice as she called Darryl into the living room. "We were wondering what happened to you."

"Call me Darryl," he reminded them as he joined them. "I'm sorry, but I had to check up on a few things. I hope Agent Harkins has been okay with you."

"He's got so many people around him, it's hard to get a word in," Mr. Michaels replied after he took the cigarette out of his mouth. "Not that we're complaining. The more people working on the case, the better."

"We were wondering if they could issue one of those Amber Alerts?" Maria asked with hope in her voice and her eyes.

Darryl hated to be the one to dash that hope. "We can only do that if there's information on a vehicle that may have been involved. I saw Agent Harkins working to spread the word through the press when I came in. That will help almost as much as a formal alert."

"We just want to try everything," Stephen said as he kept holding on to his unlit cigarette.

Darryl's heart was breaking watching the couple and knowing that their son was probably playing video games with Sheila right now. His wife always acted like the games were a waste of time and brain cells, but Darryl had caught her quickly switching off the Gamecube on a couple of occasions when he came home early from work.

"Listen," Darryl said in hushed tones as an FBI agent passed behind the couple. "Is there someplace private we can go and talk?"

"Why?" Maria asked, matching his tone.

"I'd prefer to explain when there aren't so many people around," Darryl said.

"Of course," Stephen said as he got off the couch with his cigarette still in hand. "We can go into the den. Agent Harkins designated that as a private room for us to go to whenever we feel overwhelmed."

Darryl had to give Harkins credit. The guy knew how to handle these situations, right down to dealing with the parents' fragile emotional states. He followed them into the den and waited while Stephen slid the doors shut.

"Stephen . . . Maria . . . I have some news on Tyler," Darryl said, trying to ease into the conversation. He couldn't believe what he was about to do. If the conversation went the wrong way not only could he be putting his job in jeopardy, but also several lives as well. He took one look at Stephen and Maria's faces and knew he was doing the right thing.

Maria's face lit up. "That's . . ." But her excitement immediately waned as she apparently realized that the news may not be good. "Oh, no. Is he . . ."

"I think he's fine," Darryl said. "At least for the moment. It's kind of complicated."

"Does it have to do with his last set of foster

parents?" Stephen asked. "The ones who went missing?"

"In a way," Darryl went with the lie they provided just as he had done earlier with Sheila. "It's a difficult situation to explain. Things are changing by the minute. But I wanted you to know that Paige Matthews is involved and taking care of it." He hadn't wanted to mention Paige by name, but figured it was a little something to give the couple so they would, hopefully, refrain from asking too many questions.

"That's wonderful," Maria practically screamed. "When can we see him?"

Stephen, however, was slightly more reserved. "Darryl, why couldn't you tell us this in the living room? What's going on?"

Darryl knew that was a question he couldn't even attempt to answer. "The next few hours are going to be critical," he said.

"Critical? What do you mean?" Maria asked. "Do you have our son or not?"

"I know where he is," Darryl said. "But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you his life could still be in danger."

"Oh, God," Maria said as she dropped into an armchair.

"Like I said, we've got people working on it," Darryl said, trying to sound positive. "But I need you both to do something for me."

"What? Anything," Maria said, and her husband shook his head in agreement.

"You can't tell anyone," Darryl said.

"Okay. Fine," Stephen agreed rather quickly.

"I mean, anyone," Darryl said. "That includes Agent Harkins. This is critical. If everything goes as planned, you'll have Tyler back tonight."

There was a long silence as nobody wanted to address the unspoken question.

It was Stephen who finally put it into words. "And if everything doesn't go as planned?"

"It will," Darryl said. "We're going to move heaven and earth to get your son back."

Little did they know how literally Darryl was speaking.

"I'm not comfortable with this," Stephen said as he crumpled up the cigarette and dropped it in a wastebasket. "But since it's the only plan we've got, I'll go along. Okay, honey?"

"So long as it gets Tyler back, I don't care," Maria replied. "I'll do whatever you want me to do."

Any regret Darryl may have had about coming to the house went out the window. He was glad that Paige had found such a wonderful set of parents for Tyler. The kid was lucky; with all the losers in the world, these two were definitely keepers. It made him all the more determined to get this over with as soon as possible and get Tyler back home where he belonged.

Darryl said his good-byes to Stephen and Maria. They gave him one more unprompted promise to remain silent, and he felt the weight

of their trust bear down on him even more.

He was making his way out of the house when he met face to face with Agent Harkins.

"Darryl," the agent said genially. "I was wondering what happened to you. Any luck with the social worker?"

"Nothing solid," Darryl replied. "How are things here?"

"We're doing the best we can with what little we've got," Harkins replied. "Do you think you can get me a formal report on Paige Matthews and her sisters?"

"Sure," Darryl said, though he wondered what Harkins was getting at. They had worked so well together in the past largely because when Darryl told the guy they'd hit a dead end, Harkins took him at face value, without question. "I was planning on heading back to the station." That was a complete lie, but he figured it was better than telling Harkins where he was really going.

"Great," Harkins said as he made a little notation on his notepad. "Still wish you would've told me you were going over there."

"Yeah," Darryl replied. "Sorry about that."

"No, it's okay." Harkins said as he slid the notepad into his pocket. "It seems to have worked itself out. I just didn't realize how close you were to the family."

"What do you mean?" Darryl asked with concern over the direction this conversation was going.

"I checked up on a few things," Harkins said. "It's funny how many times that Paige Matthews and her sisters keep showing up in your cases . . . especially her sisters."

"Odd coincidence, isn't it?" Darryl asked, trying to mask his apprehension. Harkins could have come at that information from several different angles. But he had no doubt how Harkins had found the connection.

He had been checking up on Darryl.

Chapter 11

"Get down!" Phoebe yelled as she knocked Gabrielle to the ground just in time to avoid the fire extinguisher the demon had flung at the woman. It was cold and wet on the linoleum, and tropical fish were flopping on the floor around them.

The demon leaped though the now empty hole in the wall and moved toward Gabrielle with his hands reaching out, ready to lay them on her to drain the power she'd just learned that she had.

Phoebe hopped back up and let her magic carry her higher as she let loose with a barrage of kicks at the demon that sent his back to the wall. As she descended, she noticed that the crash had alerted numerous people to the situation, which meant she would have to stay earthbound for the moment or risk exposing her secret.

"Call security," someone said rather calmly,

implying that outbursts of violence around the ER were not uncommon.

Just like the TV show, Phoebe thought.

She watched as a couple of strapping young heroes tried to come to her aid, only to have the demon fling them across the room. Even though the demon's only power seemed to be reflecting the Charmed Ones and Elementals' abilities back at them, he was pretty strong without any magical aid.

Phoebe looked for a weapon, but even though she was in a hospital she was apparently stuck doing battle in the most childproofed room in the place. She saw a long sliver of glass from the fish tank on the floor by the vending machine, but she didn't know how to get across the room before the demon attacked her.

The demon followed her gaze and saw the glass as well. The sneer on his face indicated that he agreed that it was the perfect weapon. He stared Phoebe down, just daring her to make her move first.

Phoebe took in the situation, refusing to give in to his dare so easily.

Gabrielle seemed to think that the ground was the safest place to be, as she stayed there and slid herself behind the row of lounge chairs. The headstrong person Phoebe had met earlier was gone, and in her place was a frightened medical student probably just trying to figure out what was going on.

A crowd was gathering in the hall, though none of those people seemed as heroic as the two guys that had just gotten themselves thrown aside. Or maybe that was the reason the rest of the group chose to remain passive observers.

How long does it take security to get here? Phoebe wondered as she considered her options. Even when the guards showed up, she figured they wouldn't be armed. They'd probably be sweet old retired cops that didn't have a chance against tall, dark, and gruesome.

That made the decision for her, and she ran to the vending machine without hesitation. The demon moved a half-second after she did, bending low so he could get the glass shard first.

Since the room wasn't that large, it was only a few steps before Phoebe and demon were about to collide. Phoebe used the momentum from the demon's considerable bulk against him as she shifted her plan mid-stride.

The floor by the vending machine was wet, so as the demon bent he also slid into the machine. Phoebe reached behind the machine and pulled from the top, using all her strength to bring it down on the demon, trapping him on the floor.

Luckily, the machine stayed in one piece and didn't smash on the wet floor, electrocuting them all. Phoebe only realized that potential flaw in her plan after it didn't happen.

The crowd cheered as an ER doctor came in and sedated the struggling demon. Security

finally arrived in time to lift the vending machine off the sleeping man. Phoebe suspected that he would be out for hours—plenty of time for the cops to come and take him away before he awoke and transported himself out of jail and to his waiting master.

She took pleasure in the fact that he would be reporting back without Gabrielle. This Tempest guy was going to be pretty mad by the time he met the Charmed Ones, the way they kept thwarting his plans. Phoebe knew that their meeting was coming soon enough. It always did.

As the crowd started to break apart—with some of the staff on tropical fish rescue—Phoebe could hear the police sirens approaching. Even though it could have been an ambulance too, Phoebe didn't want to wait to find out. The police already had her family under surveillance regarding one crime today. She didn't need to add to the list.

"We need to talk," she said as she grabbed Gabrielle's trembling arm. "Is there someplace we can go?"

"Doctor's private lounge," she replied, a little shell-shocked.

Phoebe followed the med student to a tiny room with lockers and a metal-framed bunk bed.

Gabrielle sat down on the bed. "I should have stayed a lawyer."

"The demon would have just come for you at your law office," Phoebe said.

The med student looked up at her like she was crazy. "Demon? You just stopped a demon from . . . what? Killing me?"

"Kidnapping," Phoebe said. "And I didn't stop him so much as slow him down."

"The cops are going to take him away," Gabrielle said. "As far as I'm concerned, it's over."

"Oh, but it's *so* not," Phoebe said as she calmly tried to explain just how *not* over this day was for Gabrielle.

The med student seemed to take everything in stride. She listened politely and didn't interrupt with any questions. Phoebe was quite hopeful by the end of her little speech, in spite of the dramatic pause Gabrielle took before she spoke.

Phoebe understood Gabrielle's hesitation. Being charged with saving the world was a lot to take in, especially in the middle of the workday. But once she accepted the fact that she had an even greater mission in life than just being a doctor, Phoebe knew that they would be on their way home and to the next stage of their plan.

"I'm sorry," Gabrielle said. "But I'm not going anywhere."

Piper sipped at the hot cup of coffee the woman had made for her to combat the chill from the rain. She took Piper back to her office, introduced herself as Muriel Hammond, and explained that she was alone in the place after hours because she was the bank president. However, she still

hadn't managed to reveal how she knew about Tyler.

"So, Piper, how are you and your sisters handling all the responsibilities of your gifts?" Muriel asked as she took a seat behind her big mahogany desk. "I would assume being the Charmed Ones is a tremendous amount of work."

"Tell me about it," Piper said, once again regretting the fact that she hadn't even had time for her favorite pastime recently. "But before we get all chatty, how do you know about me and my sisters? We try to keep that little secret . . . you know . . . *secret*."

"I'm sorry, I tend to do that a lot," Muriel said with a genuinely warm smile. "I'm so busy trying to solve the mysteries of life that I usually go making myself a bigger mystery to the people around me. As I'm sure you know . . . or you wouldn't be here . . . I have a certain power too."

"You're an Elemental," Piper said, filling in the blank.

"An Earthshaker," Muriel explains. "I know, lousy name. "I could have gotten Firestarter, or Windwalker, or Waterbearer . . . but no . . . I got 'Earthshaker.'"

"Sounds like a pretty strong power to have," Piper noted. She always enjoyed meeting other magical beings and comparing notes—so long as the beings were good and not trying to kill her . . . or her sisters . . . or her husband.

"It can be," Muriel said. "I've done a tremendous amount of research on it over the course of my life. It can literally shape the world, if put to good use. And don't you think it isn't very tempting to know you have the power to destroy anyone that gets in your way."

Don't I know it, Piper thought.

"But I never abuse the power," Muriel quickly added. "Well, okay . . . once. But that woman at the country club was just so annoying. She really needed a dip in the pool to cool off. I just helped by having the ground give her a little push."

Piper laughed. She wasn't allowed to use her powers for any kind of personal gain—not even by punishing a man who refused to pick up after his dog. She and her sisters had been finding ways to bend that little rule recently, but they always had to be careful not to cross the line. Even so, it was nice to meet someone with a power she could exploit if she wanted to, but still chose not to of her own free will.

"How long have you known you were an Earthshaker?" Piper asked. She and Phoebe had found out they were witches only after their Grams died when they were adults. Paige was grown when she learned about herself as well.

"All my life," Muriel replied. "I know the books say that Elementals are rare, but what's even more rare is that the Earthshaker ability seems to run in my family. We've had the power

for generations, so I knew all about it when I started shaking things up when I was around ten. I imagine it would have been a bit frightening if I hadn't known what was going on."

"Yes, it would have," Piper confirmed, remembering back to the first time she met a terrified Tyler who had no idea he could control the fires that seemed to be exploding all around him.

"Yes, you've been looking after the young Firestarter," Muriel said. "I think his name is Tyler?"

"Yes, that's . . . How do you know that?"

Muriel got up and crossed to a small wall safe. She quickly worked the combination and pulled out a manila folder. "It's all in here."

Piper flipped through the folder and found copies of photos of Tyler, including one with her and her sisters. There were also pictures of a Hispanic man and an African-American woman. The woman looked to be a doctor, in her lab coat. The accompanying paperwork confirmed that the woman worked at San Francisco General Hospital.

The file also contained personal histories on all the people in the photos, including Muriel, as well as descriptions of their powers. *This would have been useful an hour ago,* Piper thought.

"A gentleman I recently met sent that to me yesterday morning," Muriel said. "It's copies of all the information he's collected on the Night of Aeolus and the Ritual of the Guardians. He

was the Firestarter originally charged with the responsibility of gathering the Elementals, but he didn't have the chance to fulfill his task."

"The Firestarter who jumped off the Golden Gate," Piper guessed.

Muriel nodded her head sadly. "Christopher . . . I wish I had been here when he sent the file."

Piper looked at her, questioningly.

"I was in Los Angeles for the week," Muriel explained as she sat and took a drink of her coffee. "I just got back in town this morning. My desk was so laden with work that it took me a half hour to notice the file in my inbox. By then I had heard reports of the missing boy. I figured if he had been taken, Tempest would have come after me already."

"You know about Tempest?" Piper asked.

"Like I said, this power's been in my family for generations," Muriel continued. "My ancestors dealt with the demon before, though I've certainly never met him in person. I may be old, but the last time he was out and about was a hundred years ago."

"But you knew Tyler was on the run," Piper tried to clarify, wondering why the woman didn't make her presence known earlier.

"And I suspected he would run to the safety of the Charmed Ones," Muriel explained. "When we get close to the Night of Aeolus, it is the Firestarter who becomes the most open target for Tempest's demons. Since he or she is charged

with locating and collecting the other Elementals, the demons tend to go there first to find the others. It's traditional for the Firestarter to find a backup in case of an emergency. As Christopher was watching Tyler, he stumbled across the fact that the boy knew you and your sisters. It didn't take him long to realize who you were. Particularly when you fought that demon in your kitchen last week."

Piper didn't like the fact that her family was apparently being watched and she had never even been aware of it. "But why didn't he tell us what was going on?" She was so absorbed in the conversation that she'd forgotten all about her steaming cup of coffee.

"I figure he assumed there was no need, at first," Muriel said, setting down her own coffee as well. "The demons were close, but Christopher was pretty sure they didn't know where he lived. He probably assumed he could stay one step ahead of them. Unfortunately, he realized too late that he was wrong. He left a series of messages for me on my home phone." Muriel let out a long sigh. "If he had tried my cell or even left a message at work I would have gotten it and rushed back here. He was on his way to enlist your help when the demons chased him to the bridge. So now it's up to us to finish what he started."

"My sisters are already working on getting the other two Elementals," Piper said.

"So you found them already," Muriel said, returning to her warm smile. "I knew the reputation of the Charmed Ones wasn't an exaggeration. But your sisters could be in for a difficult time. The Windwalker and Waterbearer have no idea about any of this."

"If Christopher contacted you, why didn't he tell the others?" Piper asked.

"Oh, he didn't contact me," Muriel said. "I found him."

Piper tried to wrap her mind around this very involved set of circumstances.

"The Firestarter usually waits until that last moment to alert the other Elementals," Muriel continued her explanation. "So they can remain safe. While he waited, Christopher tried to find out all the information that he could about each of us so he would know the best way to approach us with the news. As I said before, if you spend your life not knowing who you really are, it can be a bit of a shock to find out."

"Tell me about it," Piper mumbled.

"Since I knew the Night was coming, it wasn't hard to figure out I was being watched," Muriel said. "So I met up with Christopher and told him he could stop following me. He was relieved that I was one less thing for him to worry about, especially since he had found out I was going out of town for the week leading up to the ritual. Besides, I know how to protect myself from demons."

"Good for you," said a woman's voice from the doorway. Piper turned to see the female demon step into Muriel's office. "Then you'll be able to protect yourself from me."

Piper stood, preparing to defend herself. She heard Muriel get out of her seat behind her.

"I know you have no powers," Muriel said. "Except to drain ours or reflect them back at us."

"Well, that certainly is true," the woman said, glaring at them. "I don't have any powers. But what I do have is this." She reached into her jacket and pulled out a gun.

Chapter 12

Paige and Rafe each grabbed one of the demon's legs and dragged his unconscious body across the highly polished gym floor to the equipment locker—or "weapons locker" as Paige had christened it in her mind. The barrage of footballs, basketballs, and field hockey sticks they had let loose on the demon had been quite effective at knocking him cold.

"So this Ritual of the Guardians thing," Rafe said, still working out what Paige had told him after the battle. "What do I have to do exactly?"

"Exactly?" Paige asked, grasping for an explanation. "Well, we don't know . . . exactly. But it's very important." Somehow, this all sounded so much more convincing in her head.

"Oh, I get that part," Rafe said as they unceremoniously dumped the demon in the equipment

locker. "And notice how I'm avoiding the whole 'why me' part of this discussion?"

"I stopped doing that whole 'why me' thing ages ago," Paige said. "Just go with it as one of those 'great powers that comes with great responsibility' things."

"So I'm Spiderman?" Rafe asked. "Hey, since your hair is red—"

"At least for the moment—"

"Does that make you Mary Jane?" he asked.

Even though she was trying not to flirt, Paige couldn't help but play along. "Honey, I could kick Mary Jane's butt."

Rafe got a little closer. "That I'd like to see."

Paige pulled back immediately. She hadn't done it intentionally, but figured she should trust her instincts.

"I'm sorry," Rafe said, pulling back as well. "I guess an unconscious demon isn't really conducive to romance."

"If unconscious demons ruined romance for me, I'd spend the rest of my life alone," Paige said. "I'm just going through a little 'me' period."

"Got it," Rafe said, sounding the appropriate amount of disappointed. "Have you ever thought of going into teaching?"

"Wow. Talk about your non sequiturs," Paige said, blinking in surprise at the sudden shift. "I really don't know what I want to do with my life. Right now I'm trying to focus on my magic."

"I was just admiring the way you filled me in

on my power to control the wind and all that 'saving the world' stuff without overwhelming me with it," he said. "Especially considering you hit some of the high points while battling a demon. It made me think you'd do pretty well against a class of fourth graders."

"Demons . . . kids . . . it's all the same to me," Paige said with a laugh as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a potion. "Certainly gives me something else to think about."

"Got a lot on your mind?" Rafe asked.

"I've been in a bit of a rut lately," she said as she uncorked the bottle of green liquid. "Sleeping potion," she explained before Rafe asked the question. "I figure we can keep him knocked out here for a while, then come back after I have time to make a proper vanquishing potion . . . or bring my sister. She's good at blowing things up."

"You have a sister?" Rafe asked, feigning interest.

"Back off, she's married," Paige replied. "Although I do have another sister. But she's a little . . . emotionally unavailable at the moment."

"Bad breakup?" he asked, prying slightly.

"Divorced a demon," Paige nodded as she poured the potion down the unconscious guy's throat. "You know, they're kinda cute when they're sleeping," she kidded.

The demon choked a little on the mixture, but didn't wake.

"No one else should be in the building until Monday," Rafe said. "We just have to be sure to

get back here before any kids come to school."

"Noted," Paige said. "We should get back to my place and meet up with my sisters. I don't know what we might have to do before tonight's ritual."

"Okay," Rafe said as they exited the gym. "But first I need to drop off the animals at the zoo. Loading the truck should go more quickly with the two of us."

"Can't that wait until tomorrow?" Paige asked. Now that they were out of the gym they could hear how much the storm had intensified. She was concerned that night was approaching and they were getting closer to their deadline.

"Hey, saving the world isn't the only responsibility I have today," Rafe said lightly. "Besides, we can use the time for you to tell me about this rut you've been in."

As the rain continued to pour outside the house, Darryl considered the different ways he could answer Harkins's inquiry into his relationship with Paige and her sisters. More and more, he was leaning toward hoping someone would yell out that they found some amazing clue that Harkins should examine immediately. That way Darryl could just ignore the question and walk away.

Unfortunately, nobody was making any kind of exciting revelations at the moment.

"Let's get a little further inside," Harkins suggested, because the rain was starting to come in the doorway.

"Like I said at the Manor," Darryl finally replied before Harkins could ask again, "Paige Matthews was a dead end. She really couldn't tell me anything more than Mr. and Mrs. Michaels had."

"I never understood why people got so pretentious with houses," Harkins said. "True, the place looked big—at least from the outside—but to call it a 'manor' just seems a little arrogant, don't you think?"

"It's a family thing," Darryl said, immediately knowing that he'd chosen the wrong answer.

"So, you know the family pretty well then?" Harkins asked.

"Their sister used to be involved with my partner," Darryl said.

"Yeah," Harkins said, genuinely saddened by the mention. "Andy was a good guy. Didn't the sister die too?"

Darryl didn't want to dwell in the past, especially considering it was such a sad subject. "The family has had its fair share of tragedy," he admitted. "I don't see what that has to do with the case we're working on. They're not even involved."

That was probably the biggest lie Darryl had told all day.

"Well, they might not be directly," Harkins said, trying to keep his voice low. "But they are at the very least peripherally involved with the case and numerous others that you've investigated."

"So what are you saying?" Darryl asked, raising his defenses even higher.

Harkins pulled Darryl further away from the others in the room so as not to be overheard. "Look, I like working with you on these cases. You're one of the most solid guys in the business. Even at the agency we heard about how you're one of those rising stars in the force. But lately, there have been . . . there's been talk."

"What kind of talk?" Darryl asked, but he already knew the answer.

"The kind of talk that goes beyond the walls of your station," Harkins replied. "And into FBI regional headquarters. The kind of talk that could put you on a different career track."

Darryl couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was one thing to put up with the jokes around the station. That was all just good-natured ribbing for the most part. Even then, he had managed to keep the more serious stuff away from Internal Affairs. The worst part was that Darryl wasn't even doing anything wrong. If anything, the help he'd given to the Charmed Ones over the years should have been rewarded with several commendations—not that Darryl was a glory hound. He could care less about receiving accolades for his work; right now he was just worried about being able to continue doing what he did without raising more questions.

"Look, if you say those girls aren't involved in this case, I'll believe you," Harkins said.

"You've earned that level of trust from me. But I'm talking big picture here, Darryl. If you keep getting involved in these weird cases with missing suspects and these girls . . . I'm just concerned for your future."

"I appreciate that," Darryl said, and he meant it. "But everything's under control. I promise you."

"All right, then." Harkins dropped the subject. "We've got a missing child to find."

"I'm on it," Darryl said, mustering up false enthusiasm as he moved toward the door. He took one last glance toward Stephen and Maria who were back on their couch trying not to look too comforted by what Darryl had told them. Maria was even back to mangling the throw pillow, though Darryl assumed that had more to do with actual concern for Tyler than covering for Darryl. He knew he'd just taken a great risk by letting them know that their son was possibly okay. Aside from the fact that it was premature, it was certainly dangerous in light of Harkins's words.

"Keep me posted," Harkins called to him.

"You know it," Darryl lied as he stepped back out into the storm.

It was raining even harder than it had been when Darryl had entered the house. The wind had kicked up as well and was blowing the tent around the yard. Several agents were trying to grab the canvas and put the thing away. Darryl hoped they would hurry because the sky was filling with lightning and they really

needed to get away from the metal tent poles.

The more intense rain did have the benefit of chasing the media into their vans, so Darryl didn't have to push past reporters and their cameras as he went back to his double-parked car. He carefully inched his way out of the packed street and hit the road for home.

Darryl had a lot to think about on his drive. Harkins had managed to hit right at the heart of what Darryl had been thinking about more and more as the day wore on. Starting with Warrington and Simpson's jokes right up to hiding the truth from his wife and flat out lying to the FBI, Darryl knew this case was digging him deeper into that hole.

Darryl kicked up the speed of the windshield wipers a notch as the rain continued coming down in sheets. He tried to push his doubts to the back of his mind because he really needed to concentrate on driving. For some reason, the San Francisco motorists felt that it was more fun to take the rain-soaked hills at high speeds on days like this, never bothering to signal their intentions and rolling to "California stops" at the stop signs.

The worries kept nagging at Darryl as he drove through the Castro. It wasn't that he was worried about being found out. Piper and Phoebe had been managing to cover for themselves—and him by association—for years. He was just worried that people would start prying and he would

have to distance himself from the Charmed Ones for their own safety.

Then again, that might not be such a bad idea, he thought.

Because he was in a moving car, Darryl didn't notice the slight rumble beneath his tires. But he couldn't miss it when the road started to buckle in front of him.

The trees along the sides of the road swayed as the earthquake hit full force.

Darryl resisted the temptation to slam on his brakes and tried to roll to a stop, but the ground had different plans. A rough jolt forced his foot to slip from the brake pedal to the gas. The short burst of speed sent his car careening out of control on the rain-slicked street.

As he rushed toward a building, Darryl panicked and slammed on the brakes, overcompensating for his original slip and sending the car fishtailing and ultimately spinning in a total loss of control. The car hopped a curb and slammed sideways into the building.

Darryl blacked out for a second, but managed to rouse himself. His entire body ached. When his eyes fluttered open he noticed that the side impact airbag had deflated, and his seatbelt had locked him in place. He could feel the rain spattering on his face. The front windshield was totally gone.

The water wasn't the concern though; it was the piece of metal sticking out of his chest that worried him as he blacked out for good.

Chapter 13

Piper stared at the gun the demon was holding on her, wondering if she could blow it up without letting the demon take her power and use it against her. She ultimately decided that a bullet would do less damage than an explosion.

"Look, witch," the demon said. "I don't care about you. Just let me have the Earthshaker and you can go on your merry way."

"I think we both know that's not going to happen," Piper replied, shifting her body so she was in front of Muriel. If she had to, she could try to freeze time if the gun was fired. Maybe if she just tried to freeze the bullet and not the demon she wouldn't have her power reflected back. Of course, the idea of freezing a bullet heading at her at the speed of, well, a speeding bullet, was no easy task. Then again, it was better than the other option: death.

Piper leaned back on the desk as she tried to come up with some other, less deadly, options. Her hand brushed against the cup of hot coffee and she was immediately glad that she hadn't drunk the whole thing. Now she just needed a distraction.

Her wish was granted as the ground beneath her started to rumble. A distraction was on the way, but it wasn't the kind that she wanted.

The demon obviously noticed the slight rumble as the evil smile on her face widened considerably. "That's right, Earthshaker. Use your power against me."

"Muriel," Piper warned, without looking back.

"Hey, that's not me," Muriel replied. "I think you should brace—"

But she wasn't able to get the full warning out as the earthquake hit, sending all three women stumbling to keep their balance. Books fell off the shelves to Piper's right and the computer crashed to the floor behind her. It was the distraction she was hoping for . . . and then some.

Piper grabbed the coffee and threw it in the demon's face as she tried to get her footing. The woman screamed and dropped the gun.

"Run!" Piper said as she reached back and took Muriel's hand, pulling her out the door of her office. She considered going for the gun, but a pile of books landed on top of it after sliding off the desk.

The ground continued to shake as they hurried across the bank lobby. Computers and desk drawers and pencils and staplers came crashing down around them.

"I love a good deus ex machina!" Muriel yelled through the commotion, referring to the ancient writer's technique of literally having the hand of a god come down and save the heroes from danger.

Piper appreciated the comment and found it particularly fitting, though Muriel seemed to be enjoying the havoc a little more than she should.

"I haven't had this much fun since I ran with the bulls!" the woman yelled as the shaking began to subside.

They reached the exit as the quake finally stopped. The glass doors had cracked but were still mostly in one piece. As Muriel reached for her keys a gunshot rang out. The bullet missed the women but hit the glass, and one of the doors exploded in a hail of safety glass.

"Thanks, dear!" Muriel yelled as she led Piper through the conveniently opened door.

Piper was amazed by the woman's energy level, and her ability to multitask as they ran to the parking lot in the pouring rain.

"Hey, Charlie," Muriel said into her cell phone after hitting the speed dial. "I was in the bank during the quake. The place seems okay, but one of the doors smashed and is wide open. Better get people from security down here and

someone to fix the door. I'm going home to check on my place."

She hung up the phone before the person on the other end could respond.

Piper looked at her in amazement as they reached the SUV.

"Bank manager," Muriel explained. "Can't let a little demon get in the way of my investment."

Piper continued to admire the woman's abilities as she belted in and started the SUV, pulling out of the spot without looking. Through the intense rain, she could see a shape approaching them. A bolt of lightning lit the sky and revealed that it was the demon, with her gun aimed at them.

"Floor it!" Muriel said as she put on her seatbelt and held on to the dash.

Piper did as instructed and slammed the pedal. The SUV's tires screeched as they found traction on the wet ground.

The demon managed to fire one off as the SUV bore down on her. She was aiming at Piper, but the shot went wide and merely nicked the side view mirror.

"Hold on!" Piper yelled as they were about to hit.

The demon was about to fire off another round when she realized that her life was in very real danger. Choosing to live and fight another day, she popped herself out of there using the demon equivalent of orbing.

Piper hardly slowed as she pulled onto the street, heading for home.

For the second time since Phoebe had met Gabrielle, she found herself helping the woman up off the floor. The earthquake had been intense and thrown both of them from their respective seats. It was a good thing too, as the bunk bed Gabrielle had been sitting on had collapsed in all the shaking.

"Are you okay?" Phoebe asked.

Gabrielle gave herself the once-over. "No apparent external injuries. Didn't hit my head, so no concussion. Although I think I bruised my ego," she said as she rubbed her posterior. "You?"

"I'm okay," Phoebe said. "Sadly, I'm pretty used to getting banged around."

They could hear commotion in the halls and suspected the hospital would be in turmoil, if not now, then very shortly. The lights had kicked off for a moment during the quake, but the emergency generator brought them back on a moment later.

The tiny doctor's lounge was a shambles with the collapsed bed, a broken sink sending water all over the floor, and the lockers blocking the door after tipping forward.

"I think we have a problem here," Phoebe said as she moved over to the lockers and examined the situation. The row of five lockers had fallen forward and slammed against the lockers

on the other side of the door, buckling those lockers in the middle. Phoebe tried to see if she could fit under the lockers, but realized that she wasn't going to get very far since the door opened *into* the room.

"Give me a hand?" Phoebe asked, suspecting that any effort would be futile.

Gabrielle joined Phoebe at the lockers. They both put a shoulder against the metal and tried to push it up and out of the way. The lockers slid about a half-inch before getting stuck.

"Okay," Phoebe said, straining against the metal. "I don't think this is working."

They took a step back to examine the situation further.

"Can't you just levitate the lockers?" Gabrielle asked. "Like you did when that guy attacked."

"That levitation thing only works on me," Phoebe said. "It's not exactly the most useful power, to be honest. It certainly won't help us here. We might be stuck until someone comes for us."

"We're in a hospital following a fairly decent quake," Gabrielle said. "Everybody's going to be too busy to come looking for us for a while."

Phoebe looked around the room, trying to find something to leverage against the lockers. The broken bed frame was looking like their best shot, when Phoebe saw something else that gave her an idea. "Maybe we can use some water pressure."

"You've got to be kidding," Gabrielle said as

she followed Phoebe's eyes to the pipe pouring water into the room. The growing puddle had almost reached their feet.

"Hey, it's either that or we wait to get electrocuted when the water level reaches the broken light on the wall," Phoebe said with a menacing tone.

"Don't be dramatic," Gabrielle said. "The water will start spilling under the door and out into the hall. Then someone will find us."

"Do you have to be so logical?" Phoebe asked. "Besides, they'd still have to break through the door to get in here. You can do this using your power over the water."

Once again, Gabrielle looked at the flowing water. "I've never used it before."

"Didn't you tell me earlier that you *walked on water*?" Phoebe asked, pushing a little harder than she knew she should be, but time was wasting.

"Yes, but I didn't know I was doing it at the time!" Gabrielle shot back.

"Look," Phoebe said, trying another track. "You can do this. I have faith in you."

"But I don't know how," Gabrielle said simply.

"From what I know, the powers are linked to your emotions," Phoebe said. "You've just got to focus."

"Fine," Gabrielle said skeptically. "I'll try it."

Gabrielle looked down at the water and made all the required expressions that looked like she was focusing on getting it to do what she wanted.

Nothing happened.

"Don't think," Phoebe said, realizing that she was talking to a former lawyer who was now a medical student. The odds that Gabrielle could stop thinking were slim to say the least. "You just have to feel the water. Let it touch your emotions."

Phoebe didn't have a clue what she was talking about, but it seemed to be working. The puddle of water stopped spreading across the room and focused itself under the lockers.

Gabrielle had closed her eyes, so she didn't know the progress she was making.

"You're doing it," Phoebe said as more water was pulled out of the pipes.

"I'm doing it?" Gabrielle asked as her eyes popped open. "I'm doing it!"

Phoebe figured that Gabrielle's excitement level must have affected her control, because the water suddenly shot up at the lockers, blowing them back against the wall. Both Phoebe and Gabrielle jumped as the water came crashing down on them, giving them each a good soaking.

"That was great," Phoebe said, putting her hand on Gabrielle's soggy back.

"Wow," was all Gabrielle could say.

Phoebe gave the woman a moment to absorb what had happened, but it was a quick moment.

"Now," Phoebe said, "I need you and your power to come with me."

"I told you, I can't," Gabrielle replied.

"But I need you," Phoebe said. "The storm, that earthquake—they're just the beginning. If you're not with me at midnight, the weather will be the least of our worries."

"I told you I couldn't go before because I was busy," Gabrielle said. "How busy do you think I'm going to be now?"

Gabrielle opened the door to prove her point and Phoebe saw a scene right out of a movie. In addition to the destruction from the quake, the place was already looking like a triage center as bloodied bodies crowded the hallways in every direction and more were coming through the doors.

"My point exactly," Phoebe said. "If you don't come with me right now, the entire world will look like that tomorrow."

"Gabrielle!" a doctor yelled to her when he looked up from a patient he was treating. "They need you at curtain one. Now!"

"You said midnight, right?" Gabrielle asked as she started into the hall. "Where do you need me?"

"We're not sure yet," Phoebe said as she followed the med student. "But we'll probably need you before midnight, actually.

"Look, I'll be here," she said. "Come talk to me when you're ready to go. I'll see if I can get away."

"And if you can't?" Phoebe asked.

Gabrielle just shrugged as she disappeared

behind the curtained-off section of the ER. Phoebe considered following the woman behind the curtain, but the pained moaning coming from the other side told her it wasn't the best course of action.

The general chaos of the ER was increasing and Phoebe knew that she wasn't going to convince Gabrielle to leave with her. She could only hope that things would be a little calmer in a few hours.

Phoebe decided to head back to her car and find out how the others had done on their respective assignments. She tried using her cell phone to reach her sisters, but she only got a message that said NO SERVICE.

The rain was really coming down and the sounds of sirens echoed in every direction as she pulled out of the parking garage. Phoebe had to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting an ambulance rushing past her.

Once she determined the coast was clear, Phoebe carefully took to the street, unaware that the ambulance that just passed was carrying her badly injured friend, Darryl.

Chapter 14

"And then there was one," Tempest said as his female minion stood before him.

"Master—"

Tempest put up his hand to silence her. "You do realize that the Night of Aeolus comes only once every one hundred years, right? Now, I realize that my being a . . . well . . . a *being* almost as old as time might make it seem like a hundred years is a drop in the proverbial bucket . . . and let's face it, it is . . . but I still feel the time passing. I still feel every day and every minute. I'm *still* stuck in this boring environment while you get to go and frolic in the rain and the lightning and the quaking earth."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I do realize that in the grand scheme of things your failure was not as bad as the others," Tempest said. "You returned to me. They haven't managed that one yet."

"I can find them," she said. "I can still feel them. Let me go to the hospital . . . to the school."

"No," Tempest said. "I need at least one of you to remain alive until tonight. Well, it's not a total necessity, but it would certainly make *my* life easier. What say you work with me here? Haven't we been formulating this plan for, oh . . . the past century? The others will return to us if they can."

"And if they can't?" she asked. "What happens to them?"

"Do you really think I care?"

It took Piper close to an hour to get home from the financial district because streetlights and traffic lights were out all over the city. The pouring rain didn't help any, nor did the general populace's tendency to shy away from giving the right of way when everyone came to a four-way stop at an intersection. The one good thing about the rain was that it was helping control some of the fires that had sprung up. The quake hadn't been as bad as the big one that hit back when Piper was in high school, but it was fairly substantial.

Piper and Muriel kept their conversation to a minimum so Piper could concentrate on driving through the obstacle course of torn-up streets, abandoned cars, and windblown debris. They found that there was suddenly a lot less to say as they took in the destruction, knowing things would only get worse if Tempest managed to get a hold of the Elementals' powers before

midnight. The demon was proving to be a very big threat considering the Charmed Ones hadn't even met the guy yet.

"Here we are," Piper said as she pulled up the drive.

The Manor had fared very well in the quake, at least on the outside. That didn't surprise Piper. The place was used to being shaken, blasted, and generally abused throughout the course of a normal day.

The inside wasn't that bad either. Certainly things had fallen on the floor and smashed, but it wasn't any worse than most demon attacks. Piper was a little annoyed to discover that they were going to have to go out and buy yet another grandfather clock, though.

"Leo!" Piper called out as soon as she shut the door behind her. "Leo, get down here!"

"Who's Leo?" Muriel asked.

"My husband," Piper replied with a smirk. "I'm surprised you didn't read about him in Christopher's file."

"So am I," Muriel said, returning the look.

"Leo!" she called again as she showed Muriel into the living room.

"Maybe he's not home," Muriel suggested, unaware of the fact that Piper's voice could be heard much further than the walls of the house.

"Yeah, I was sort of counting on that," Piper replied.

Blue sparkling lights dropped from the sky,

combining together to form the body of Piper's orbing husband.

"That's a neat little trick," Muriel said as Leo became whole.

"Company?" Leo asked as he held out his hand to Muriel. "Hi, I'm Leo."

"Muriel," she replied as she took his hand. "You'll have to show me how you do that sometime."

"Sorry, it's kind of one of those innate things," he said.

"Pity," she replied, letting go of his hand but allowing her eyes to linger a moment.

Piper wasn't sure, but she thought that the senior citizen was coming on to her husband.

"The house looks a lot worse up there," Leo said to Piper as he took in the surroundings and Muriel.

"Hey, I had nothing to do with it," Muriel said, holding her hands up in an innocent pose.

"I take it Muriel is the Earthshaker," he said as he righted a chair so she could sit.

"Guilty," Muriel said, taking the seat.

"Since you know her title, I'm assuming the Elders were a help?" Piper asked, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. More often than not, the all-powerful beings that watched over the Charmed Ones liked to let them figure things out for themselves. Leo, being the conduit to the Elders, usually got stuck in the middle of those struggles of will.

"I know where we can find the Circle of Gaea," he replied.

"Oh, good," Muriel said. "Christopher left that out of his notes too. Since it moves to a different place every Night of Aeolus, I think he was afraid the demons would find it if he wrote the location somewhere."

"Christopher?" Leo asked.

"The first Firestarter," Piper explained. "But that doesn't mean Tempest won't know the location anyway. We need to be prepared."

"Where are your sisters?" Leo asked.

"The cell phone towers must be down," Piper said. "Or flooded with calls. I couldn't get through to either of them or Darryl."

"None of them have called for me," Leo said. "So they shouldn't be in danger."

"We hope," Piper added.

Two more sets of glowing lights formed in the living room, turning into Paige and guest.

"Hi, honey, we're home," Paige said as she appeared.

Introductions were made, and when the Earth and Air Elementals shook hands, everyone could feel a little ripple of power through the room.

"Everything go all right?" Piper asked Paige once they all settled down into chairs.

"We're going to have to take care of a demon trapped in a school, but otherwise everything's fine," Paige replied.

"Is that why it took you so long to orb home?" Leo asked.

Paige and Rafe exchanged a look.

"Not exactly," he said.

"You know where you don't want to be during an earthquake?" Paige asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "You don't want to be in a zoo . . . or anywhere *near* a zoo, for that matter."

Everyone in the room got their own mental picture of what Paige was suggesting.

"We decided to stick around for a while and help corral the animals," Paige said. "Once that seemed to be in hand, we left Rafe's truck in the parking lot and zipped right back here."

"That little transporter thing was fun," Rafe said. "And would be so convenient when I'm late for work."

"Any word on Darryl or Phoebe?" Paige asked.

"Nope," Piper replied as she got up to start pacing. She knew her sister could handle herself well enough, but worrying was what big sisters did best.

"Maybe we should go over what we know so far," Leo suggested.

Piper assumed that he said that to help take her mind off whatever Phoebe may be up to. She appreciated the suggestion, but she could talk and worry at the same time.

The group followed Piper's lead, bringing everyone up to speed and contributing where they could. Rafe seemed to be having the most

trouble accepting what was going on, which was only natural. He was the only one that had woken up that morning thinking he was perfectly normal—well, except for a little telekinesis.

They were just about to get to Leo's part of the discussion when Phoebe came through the door.

"Good thing the Manor's so big," she said as she took in all the people in the room. "We sure do get a lot of unexpected guests."

Once again, everyone did introductions.

"Can't help but notice you came back alone," Piper said, trying to keep the mood light in spite of the hellacious storm as a reminder of the severity of the situation. "We've got our innocents. Where's yours?"

"She's a little busy at the moment," Phoebe replied. "But she's going to try to make it tonight . . . I think."

"I'm sorry," Rafe said. "I realize you guys do this type of thing a lot, but what could be more important than this ritual thing we're supposed to do tonight?"

"Gabrielle's working at the emergency room at San Francisco General," Phoebe explained. "It's a madhouse there right now."

"Okay," Piper said. "But she *is* going to join us later, right?"

"Well . . ."

"Phoebe?" Piper didn't like it when her sister stalled like that. It usually meant they weren't going to like what they were about to hear.

"She's kind of an . . . intensely focused individual," Phoebe explained. "I mean, she quit her job as a lawyer to pursue a medical career. Can you believe that? And here I thought I'd be stuck working on the newspaper for the rest of my life."

"I'm sorry," Muriel said, working up a little head of steam. "But I'm sixty-seven . . . I've had *five* careers . . . and I'm not even ready for retirement yet. What's the big deal? I understand this woman's busy, but she's got to make time."

"Like going out of town right before a hugely important ritual?" Piper asked, trying to keep an accusatory tone out of her voice. In truth, she was a little jealous since she couldn't remember the last time *she* had gotten out of town.

"Yes," Muriel said. "Aside from the Night of Aeolus, my family has always tried to use our powers to help mankind. But in addition to that, we have also tried to live our lives. And the first thing we're taught is how to prioritize and find time for ourselves. Haven't you girls learned that yet?"

Piper wasn't sure that she got the point. "But you said you wished you could have been here earlier," she reminded Muriel.

"But the truth is, I probably couldn't have stopped anything that happened," Muriel said. "And I would have been in the same danger as Christopher, so it was really for the best that I was in L.A."

Piper was impressed that Muriel could address her own problem so concisely. Her attention was always split between her responsibilities as a Charmed One, her work life, and her *actual* life. Then again, she had left the phone all day while the club was dealing with problems, and they'd apparently managed without her. She figured if a sixty-seven-year-old banker with magical powers could take a week off, she could at least find the time to get in some cooking.

Then she fell right back into the trap by worrying about the club when she remembered that it was hit by the earthquake as well.

"There's nothing you can do," Leo whispered to her. "Whatever damage is done, it will be there tomorrow. The club wasn't even open yet when the quake hit."

"How do you do that?" she whispered back, wondering if the Whitelighter could read her mind.

"I love you," he replied.

"Okay, people, we need to focus," Paige said. "Leo, what happened with the Elders? Did you find out where the Circle of Gaea is?"

"By the Crystal Springs Reservoir," Leo said. "Right off the . . ."

". . . San Andreas Fault," everyone in the room finished for him.

"Figures," Paige said.

Piper plotted out their plan. "So then we'll collect Tyler and the Waterbearer—"

"Gabrielle," Phoebe added, then mumbled, "if we can get her."

"—and then Leo and Paige can orb us over there," she finished.

"No can do, honey," Leo said. "The Elders said that we had to get to the Circle of Gaea by earthly means."

"Earthly means?" Piper asked. "What exactly does that mean? Can we take my car?"

"I know a few people who might not consider an SUV to be very 'earthly,'" Phoebe said.

"Well, if we have to walk there we're already too late," Leo said.

"What about that 'by the light of the moon,' part you guys mentioned earlier?" Rafe asked.

Piper glanced out the window to see that the storm was still raging. *Good question*, she thought. She also noticed that the FBI agents had left, probably after the quake hit.

"Don't worry about the moon thing," Muriel said. "Everything will be fine once we get there. Oh, there is one thing I almost forgot. We're going to need a few items for the ritual."

"Such as?" Piper asked.

"A sword, a wand, a chalice, and some coins," Muriel replied. "Preferably old coins. The time period doesn't really matter, but the older the better."

"We've got all that in the attic," Piper said.

Rafe looked at Paige curiously. "You've got a very interesting family," he said.

"You don't know the half of it," she replied. "So now what do we do?"

"We wait," Piper said. "Although we should try to get Darryl back here. I tried his cell earlier but couldn't get through."

"Maybe I should orb—" Paige was interrupted when the phone rang.

"Yeah, forgot about land lines," Piper said. "Honey, could you orb upstairs and get that."

"I wouldn't have to if you hadn't blown up the phone in the kitchen this morning," Leo teased as he orbed.

Piper couldn't help but notice that Rafe and Muriel were looking at her oddly.

"What?" she asked. "It was a rough morning."

Leo orbed back down with the cordless phone.

"Sheila, I can't hear you," he said into the phone with a worried look on his face. "We have a bad connection. . . . Darryl's where?"

Chapter 15

Everyone in the room froze when they heard the concern in Leo's voice. Piper immediately regretted leaving Darryl to look after Tyler with no defenses against demon attack.

"Okay . . . ," Leo said into the phone. He looked at the sisters. "Paige is already on her way to your house, so she should be there in a couple of minutes. Do you need a ride to the hospital?"

The Charmed Ones took a collective breath and stood up. The guests in the room had no doubt that these were sisters by the way they moved as one to Leo's side.

"I understand . . . ," Leo continued. "We'll meet you there."

"Hospital?" Piper asked as Leo hung up the phone. "Was there an attack? How's Tyler?"

"No attack," Leo said calmly. "Tyler's fine.

Darryl was in a car accident during the quake. He's in critical condition."

"No," Piper said, not wanting to believe it.

Suddenly the room was a flurry of activity as Leo doled out orders.

"Paige, orb over to Darryl's house and get Tyler," Leo said. "Pretend like you drove and I called you on your cell."

"But—"

"Sheila's in no shape to wonder how you got a cell signal," he explained. "A police car is on the way to the house to get her to the hospital, so you need to get Tyler out of there now."

"On my way," Paige said, and she orbed without another word.

"Phoebe, you and I are going to the hospital," Leo said.

Piper wasn't crazy about that idea since she inexplicably felt responsible for getting Darryl involved in the first place. "Leo, I think I should—"

"No," Leo said gently. "I need you to go upstairs and collect the items for the ritual."

"I can do that," Phoebe offered.

"I'm going to need your help," Leo said. "Darryl was taken to San Francisco General over an hour ago. We don't have much time. I may need you to convince your innocent to get us into his room so I can heal him."

"And convince her to join us while you're at it," Muriel added jovially, trying to lighten the mood.

She failed.

"Honey?" Leo took his wife in his arms.

"Go," Piper said calmly, yet forcefully.

Leo let go of his wife, took Phoebe by the arm, and did as he was told.

Piper watched as they disappeared. She was on the verge of tears. Sure, they had been through worse before, but Darryl was injured over an hour ago. There was no telling whether or not Leo would make it in time.

"I'll get the things we need for the ritual," she said without looking at her houseguests and made her way to the stairs.

When Piper reached the attic she realized that she had forgotten about the blown-out door. It seemed like ages ago since they'd vanquished the demon that had tried to take Tyler's power.

The plastic sheeting Leo had put up over the broken window in the attic was flapping in the wind as rain poured inside. She hurried over to the window and reattached the plastic to the nails Leo had put in the walls. It probably wouldn't hold for much longer, but there were more pressing concerns than the attic floor getting wet.

Piper turned and went over to the trunk where she and her sisters stored the odd weapons they collected in their travels. There were several swords inside, and she chose the most lightweight one, figuring it would be easier to carry to the Circle of Gaea.

The chalice and wand were the next things on her mental list. They were easy enough to locate

as they kept all the magic paraphernalia in a cabinet near the Book of Shadows. She held the wand in her hand for the first time, since she never had the need for it before, and then placed both items on the floor beside the sword.

Lastly, she needed the coins. She remembered Grams had a bag of old coins that Piper had liked to play with when she was a child, only she had no idea where in the attic they could be. She started her search in the old bureau along the sidewall.

The first two drawers had nothing but old rags in them, and the third one was empty. The bottom drawer was stuck, and no matter how hard Piper pulled, it wouldn't budge. Frustrated, she waved her hands and blew the drawer up.

It was empty too.

"Good thing what you were looking for wasn't in that drawer," Muriel said as she came into the room, "or it would have pretty much been destroyed too."

"Sorry," Piper said as she moved her search to the old apothecary cabinet that so didn't belong in the house. "I have to find those coins."

"Is that what happened to your phone in the kitchen?" Muriel asked with her lighthearted tone that Piper was *not* getting used to. "Couldn't find it so you blew it up?"

"I was a little stressed this morning," Piper explained as she banged open and shut the little drawers on the cabinet. "I'm a little stressed now."

"I can see that," Muriel said. "Everything is going to work out."

"How can you say that?" Piper asked, banging more drawers.

"Because it always does," Muriel replied.

Piper slammed the last drawer shut. "No, it doesn't," she said quietly, thinking back to her sister Prue, who had died the last time everything *didn't* work out.

"True," Muriel said as something unspoken passed between the two of them. "But we move on. We live. And honey, you've got to live."

"But I've got all these responsibilities . . . ," Piper said.

"And you do what you can and then move on. Start by finding anything that can make your life a little easier," Muriel said as she held out her hand and showed Piper that she was holding two quarters, a dime, and four pennies. "Rafe had these in his pocket."

"But you said you needed old coins," Piper said.

"No, I said that old coins would be *better*," Muriel corrected her. "But if it's going to take us all night to find those coins, we should just make do with what we have. It doesn't always have to be perfect. It just has to be good enough."

Piper's mind flashed back to her Mulligatawny stew.

Paige orbed herself right to Darryl's front door and rang the bell. Sheila had it open almost

before Paige could even get wet from the rain.

"Leo called me," Paige said as she entered the house. She relaxed a little when she saw Tyler sitting quietly on the couch. The Gamecube and games were sitting out in front of him, but he obviously wasn't in the mood to play. "Do you need me to do anything? Take care of Darryl Junior?"

"He's with his grandparents," Sheila explained. "I called them, but told them not to say anything until we know more."

"I'm so sorry that this happened," Paige said softly.

"I spend so much time worrying about being married to a police officer," Sheila said, holding back tears, "that I forget normal things happen like car accidents and earthquakes."

But Paige knew that the earthquake was far from a normal occurrence.

"Hey, Tyler," Paige said, hoping to lighten his mood a little. "You been enjoying the gaming?"

"Yeah," he replied, though his voice sounded hollow. Paige assumed that he was blaming himself for this as much as Paige and her sisters were blaming themselves. Although, truth be told, none of them really had any control over the situation.

A siren could be heard over the sound of the storm.

"That's probably the car the chief sent for me," Sheila said quickly. "You've got to get Tyler out of here."

"Are you—"

"Go," Shelia said, pushing them toward the kitchen. "Out the back door. The last thing Darryl needs when he wakes up is to be questioned about what a missing child was doing in his home."

Even though Sheila was speaking logically, with no accusatory tone in her voice, Paige couldn't help but think that she was being blamed. She chose not to say anything as she and Tyler went back out into the rain. As soon as the door was shut, Paige orbed them home.

In the blink of an eye they were back in the living room. Rafe was sitting on the couch alone.

"Where'd everybody go?" Paige asked.

"Leo and Phoebe are at the hospital," Rafe explained, looking down at Tyler. "Piper and Muriel are upstairs."

"Tyler, this is Rafe," Paige said. "You two have something in common. Rafe can control the wind, and he just found that out this afternoon. So, your little eleven-year-old self is way ahead of him."

Rafe and Tyler shook hands awkwardly— the boy was obviously uncomfortable with the adult ritual. Once again, though, they felt a ripple of energy go through the air as Fire and Air met.

"You know, I think we have some ice cream in the kitchen," Paige said. "Mint chocolate chip."

"Hot chocolate, mac and cheese, and ice cream," Tyler said, reliving his junk food intake. "All in one day."

"You should get kidnapped more often, huh?" Paige said before she realized the words were out

of her mouth. Even though the comment was inappropriate and in bad taste, for some reason the three of them just broke up laughing.

"What horrible thing has to happen to me so I can get some whipped cream?" Tyler asked, playing along.

Paige just laughed some more. "I'll be right back."

She went into the kitchen. It hadn't fared so well in the quake. In addition to the blown-up phone and the two cabinets still missing doors, most of the contents of those cabinets and the others had spilled out onto the floor.

Paige grabbed one of the few unbroken bowls and got the ice cream out of the freezer. As she was scooping it into the bowl, Rafe joined her in the kitchen.

"You know, I really do think you should consider teaching," he said.

"Again, with the non sequitur," she shot back. "I don't think we should leave Tyler alone right now."

"Piper and Muriel came down with the goodies for the ritual," he explained. "But back to the subject at hand. I liked how you dealt with Tyler, getting him to laugh during a serious situation."

"I get a lot of practice with the kids at the center," Paige said.

"But I get the feeling that the center isn't giving you what you're looking for," Rafe said. "Teaching could be your calling."

"I've found my calling," Paige said. "I'm a witch, remember?"

"No, that's your mission," Rafe said. "Your calling is something that you want to do, not something that you *have* to do."

"Right now, I *have* to focus on my magic," Paige said as she closed the ice cream container and put it back in the freezer.

"But that doesn't mean you have to give up entirely on your calling," Rafe countered. "It just means you have to postpone it for a while. Don't worry, it'll come when you need it."

Paige considered what he was saying . . . and wondered why she'd chosen to stop flirting with him earlier.

Leo and Phoebe paced outside the operating room that was off to the side of the ER. They had been at the hospital for fifteen minutes and had gotten little information so far.

"What's going on in there?" Phoebe asked.

"The nurse said the wound was deep," Leo reminded her. "This kind of surgery can't be rushed."

"Well, you can't save him if he dies on the operating table," Phoebe said in exasperation. "We should have brought Piper. She could have frozen time so we could slip in there."

"And miraculously heal him in the middle of the operation?" Leo asked. "I don't think the Elders would like that plan."

"I don't really care what the Elders think right now," Phoebe said, scanning the ER. The place was far more crowded than it had been when Phoebe was there earlier.

"Can't you just heal all these people and get them out of here?" Phoebe asked.

Leo chose not to respond to the question, since Phoebe was well aware that the Elders would *really* frown upon that plan.

They paced for a few more minutes.

"I know," Phoebe said. "We could dress up in scrubs and barge in there arrogantly claiming that we're world-famous surgeons who need the room emptied so we can perform amazing medical feats."

Leo just stared at her.

"Well, it always works in the movies," Phoebe laughed. She often relied on humor when the tension was getting to her.

"What about your innocent . . . Gabrielle?" Leo asked.

"She's got to be around here somewhere," Phoebe said.

She was concerned that the high volume of people would keep Gabrielle from joining them later. Phoebe knew if Gabrielle refused that they would be forced to take her with them against her will. The ritual was just too important to let one overstressed medical student stop it. It seemed fitting to Phoebe that a day that started with an attempted kidnapping could wind up ending with a real one.

"I'll go look for her," Phoebe said as she left Leo.

Even though the place was packed, it didn't take her long to find Gabrielle. The woman was comforting a little girl who was holding her arm like it was broken. Phoebe waited for Gabrielle to walk away before approaching her.

"Hey, Gabby," Phoebe said, forcing the cheeriness into her voice.

"It's *Gabrielle*," she replied, sounding exhausted. "Look, I know I told you to come back later, but as you can see, it's crazy here. I just can't go."

"Yeah, we'll get to that in a minute," Phoebe said. "First I need you to come with me."

"I've got patients to look after," Gabrielle said.

"Yeah, and I've got a specific one who needs your help," Phoebe said as she pulled the med student along with her.

When they reached Leo, Phoebe saw by the look on his face that he had some news.

"The operation's over," Leo said before she could even introduce him to Gabrielle. "But he's still in critical condition. There's a nurse in there, but she won't let me in."

"Gabrielle, we need you to get the nurse out in the hall," Phoebe said.

"Look, you and your friend have to understand that the nurse has a job to do," Gabrielle explained. "And so do I. You just can't get in the way."

"Yes, we can," Phoebe said simply. "We're trying to save a life."

Chapter 16

"Gabrielle, you're not the only one with powers," Phoebe said, taking the med student aside so the people bustling through the crowded hall couldn't hear. "My friend is a very powerful man and he can help Darryl. But he has to get inside. Now."

The med student took a moment to consider what Phoebe was saying.

She relented with a sigh. "Okay."

Phoebe was surprised that the woman gave in so easily. Then again, she figured Gabrielle knew they wouldn't leave without getting in the room, so she probably just chose the option that got them out of there the fastest.

"We need to come up with a reason why the nurse has to leave the room," Phoebe said. "Since this is the emergency room, I'm thinking some kind of emergency."

"And we need her to stay away for a few minutes," Leo said. "She can't come right back or—"

"Why don't I just offer to take over for her?" Gabrielle said simply, in a somewhat condescending tone.

"You can do that?" Phoebe asked, surprised by the ease of the plan.

"I'm a medical student," Gabrielle reminded them. "That's why I'm here . . . to help."

Phoebe knew when she was being berated, so she shut her mouth as Gabrielle entered Darryl's room. She found the woman to be an interesting case. Rarely had she seen a person so focused on her goals. *It's a shame that it keeps her from seeing that whole big picture thing,* Phoebe thought.

The nurse left about a minute after Gabrielle went into the room. Phoebe and Leo exchanged a look and waited for the nurse to disappear down the hall before going in.

"Your friend's in bad shape," Gabrielle said quickly. She obviously still needed to work on that bedside manner.

"It's okay," Phoebe said as she looked over Darryl, who appeared to be far from okay. "As long as he's alive."

"I can work with that," Leo completed the thought as he moved to the bed.

"What are you going to do?" Gabrielle asked.

"Just watch," Phoebe said as she took her own advice.

Leo put his hands on Darryl's chest and concentrated. Phoebe watched as the blue light emanated from his hands, spreading into Darryl's body. Even with all the magic she had witnessed in her life, Phoebe was still amazed by this particular power.

It took a little longer than usual to kick in, probably because Darryl had been out for so long. But, eventually, Darryl's eyes fluttered open.

"Hey, what did I miss?" he asked immediately. "Did the world come to an end?"

"Not yet," Phoebe said, shooting a glance at Gabrielle.

Phoebe and Leo filled Darryl in on the events, including the former seriousness of his condition. When they mentioned Gabrielle's apparent lack of interest in joining them, the medical student tried to look disinterested, as if they weren't talking about her. But Phoebe saw something in the woman's gaze that made her think they were starting to get through.

"What do you need me to do?" Darryl asked.

"Recuperate," Phoebe said. "You've done enough. We can handle it from here."

"You know I'm perfectly fine now," Darryl said, giving a nod of appreciation in Leo's direction. "I'm not just going to lie around here and do nothing."

"The hell you aren't," Sheila said from the doorway.

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Darryl looked across the room, both happy to see his wife and upset that he had caused her to worry.

"Hi, dear," he said. "Don't worry. I'm—"

Sheila cut him off by crossing the room in two giant steps and throwing him into a tight hug. The embrace ached a little, as he still wasn't a hundred percent over being almost dead.

"You scared me," she said as she pulled away from him and playfully smacked him.

Darryl considered acting like she had really hurt him, but figured that joke might be just a little cruel. Besides, he needed her in a good mood for the discussion they were about to have.

"Um . . . we'll wait outside," Phoebe said as she pushed Leo out of the room.

"I have to stay and monitor the equipment," Gabrielle shyly explained. "Although I'm thinking that's not entirely necessary now."

"You can stay," Darryl said. "I don't want you to get into trouble for abandoning your post." He turned his gaze to his wife. "How's Darryl Junior? Did he ride out the quake?"

"He's fine," Sheila replied. "Having a wonderful time with his grandparents. But how are you? Really."

"Just a little tingle in my chest," Darryl said, rubbing the spot where he had been injured. "Otherwise, I'm perfectly fine."

"Good," Sheila said with relief. "Now what's this about you going somewhere?"

Darryl confirmed that the door was closed and the only person within earshot, Gabrielle, already knew most of what was happening.

"A little boy's life is still in danger," Darryl said. "And I still have responsibilities." He knew that technically he had done his part. There wasn't any real *need* for him to go along on this Night of Aeolus thing, but he wanted to see it through. Any case that sent him to the hospital and nearly killed him was one that needed a little closure.

"Phoebe said you had done enough," Sheila reminded him.

"Exactly how long were you standing at that door?" Darryl asked, going over the earlier conversation in his mind, making sure they hadn't said too much toward the end of it.

"Long enough to know that they don't need you," Sheila said. "And I do. And so does our son."

Darryl tried not to glance over at Gabrielle. He suddenly felt really odd having a stranger in the room to witness this personal conversation.

"Do we have to go through the 'a cop's duty' speech once again?" Darryl asked kindly.

"We were supposed to be having a romantic dinner right now," Sheila reminded him.

"And we will," Darryl said. "I promise. I just need to see this through first."

"They're never going to let you out of this hospital."

"I think they're busy enough that they won't

miss me," Darryl said, "especially if my wife raises some hell over getting me out of here."

"Somehow I doubt that," Sheila said, looking over to Gabrielle for confirmation.

The medical student just shrugged.

"I'll see what I can do," Sheila said, giving him another hug. "Don't you go anywhere until I get back."

"Where can I go?" Darryl asked, pointing to his blankets and thin hospital gown. "I'm naked under this flimsy hospital gown."

"Don't remind me," Sheila said in a flirtatious tone.

Now Darryl felt *really* embarrassed that someone else was in the room.

"You know they're not going to release you," Gabrielle said as soon as Sheila was out of the room. "The doctors don't even know you're awake."

"It's not like they can stop me," Darryl said. "Can I get a little help here?" He indicated to the wires and tubes attached at various points along his body.

Gabrielle hesitated for a moment before giving in and unhooking him from everything.

"Besides, they're probably preoccupied by the quake," he said once he was free. "How bad was it?"

"Bad enough," she replied.

"Well, we'll take care of that," he said as he went over to get his pants, which were hanging

on the back of the door. His shirt wasn't there, and he figured it had to have been ripped off for the operation.

Darryl modestly slipped into his pants, keeping the gown on, for lack of anything better to cover his top.

"So, what's your power?" Gabrielle asked.

"Some people have said it's my charm," he replied.

"No, seriously," she said with a smile. "What's your part in all this?"

"Technically, I don't really have a role," Darryl said, sitting on the bed so he could put on his socks and shoes. "I'm a mere mortal."

Gabrielle seemed to be thinking about her next question. "So why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you putting your life in danger?" she clarified the question. "You have other responsibilities. Your wife . . . your child."

"Add my job to that list," he said. "The boss is not particularly thrilled with my actions all the time."

"Then why do you do it?" Gabrielle asked.

"That's a good question," Darryl replied. "I wish I knew the answer."

Darryl walked across the room and opened the door. "You can come in now," he said to Phoebe and Leo, who were right outside.

"All better?" Phoebe asked.

"More or less," Darryl replied. "Why did you

wait outside? You could have come back in when Sheila left."

"We wanted to give you and Gabrielle a chance to talk," Phoebe replied, looking at the med student. "Did Darryl convince you to come along?"

Gabrielle looked at her for a moment. "How did you know?"

Phoebe threw a smile in Darryl's direction. "Because that's what Darryl does."

Chapter 17

"Do I get the sword?" Tyler asked excitedly as Piper handed out the items she had collected from the attic. She was about to hand that particular item to Rafe.

"That's fine," Muriel said. "The Fire and Air symbols are interchangeable. Tyler can have the sword and Rafe can take the wand."

"But I want the sword," Rafe whined jokingly. It was the first laugh the people in the room had shared since Phoebe and Leo had returned with Darryl and Gabrielle.

When they had appeared and all four Elementals met for the first time, the room had practically crackled with energy. For a moment, the raging storm had even seemed to subside.

"I'm not crazy about giving an eleven-year-old boy a sword," Piper said, sounding totally

maternal. "You could put your whole face out with that thing."

"I'll be careful," Tyler said. "Promise."

Piper considered the request. It might be incredibly wrong to arm a normal child that way, but she also knew that he had already proven he was mature enough for the responsibility.

"Okay," she gave in, handing him the sword. "But only use it for the ritual. Don't go swinging it around . . . unless you absolutely have to."

"Cool," Tyler said as he held the sword in his hands. Piper could tell that he was just dying to hack at something.

How sweet, she thought sarcastically. Then she handed the wand to Rafe.

"First person who makes a Harry Potter joke gets it," Rafe said, holding the wand up menacingly. "Right between the eyes."

Piper completed her task of handing out the symbolic ritual items by giving Gabrielle the chalice that her Grams used to say she drank from at her third wedding. Muriel already had the sixty-four cents safely in her pocket.

"Whoa, somebody looks hot," Phoebe said as Darryl and Leo came down the stairs.

"Thank you," Leo said, modestly.

Piper knew that her sister was referring to Darryl, who had borrowed one of Leo's shirts. It was a little tight on the police officer and showed off his well-developed muscles. Although, Piper

had to admit, the shirt did look better on her husband.

"Where's Paige?" Darryl asked as he looked over the group.

"Mission accomplished," Paige said as she orbed in. "Scratch one demon."

"Why would you scratch a demon?" Rafe asked.

This time, no one laughed.

"Wow, someone totally lost the funny while I was gone," Paige said.

"You took care of the demon at the school?" Piper clarified things, for Darryl's sake.

"Gone, and apparently forgotten," Paige said. "At least by Tempest."

"That leaves two demons," Piper said.

"And two more potion bottles," Paige said, holding up her little gift bag of demon death. "Not to mention the ones for Tempest."

"I figure the demon we sent to jail probably escaped by now," Phoebe agreed.

The earth gave a little rumble, and everyone braced for a stronger aftershock, but it didn't come.

"Excuse me," Muriel said daintily with her hand to her mouth once the rumble had stopped.

This time, everyone laughed.

"I guess *she* found the funny," Paige said, giving Rafe a playful jab. Even when she wasn't trying to flirt, she wound up flirting.

"So everyone knows the plan?" Piper asked

and was met with a round of nodding heads. The tension was stronger than the ripple of power that seemed to be emanating from the Elementals every few minutes. Only hours earlier Rafe, Gabrielle, and even Tyler had no clue of the huge responsibilities on their shoulders.

"You okay?" Phoebe asked as she took a seat on the couch beside Gabrielle.

"Just a little overwhelmed," Gabrielle replied. "This wasn't part of my plan. You see . . . I have a very specific life plan ensuring that I make the best use of my time."

"I think saving the world is a pretty good use of your time," Phoebe said, trying to figure the woman out.

"It is," Gabrielle said. "But it's not part of the plan. I mean, what do I do next? If this works out, I mean. I guess we're all dead if it doesn't, so that will be a pretty definite plan. But I mean, I've got this power that I never expected to have. Am I like a superhero?"

Phoebe was amazed to watch this incredibly put-together, totally ordered and precise woman break down right in front of her.

"No, you're not a superhero," Phoebe said, although she often wondered the same thing about herself. "You're just a person with a gift. It's up to you whether or not you choose to embrace it. You can't plan for everything, you know. Eventually something will come up that could

lead your life in a whole different direction. Look at Muriel. She's done a ton of different things and never let any plan get her stuck in one rut for her whole life. . . . Huh."

"What?" Gabrielle asked.

"I think I just found my own moral," Phoebe said with a self-satisfied tone. "And look at it this way, the body's made up of what? Eighty percent water? Sounds like your path is already part of your plan."

As soon as the words were out of Phoebe's mouth, she could see a shift in Gabrielle's entire demeanor. It was as if everything fell into place once she realized that her power was already fitting into the life she had laid out for herself.

"I was just eavesdropping on Phoebe and Gabrielle," Paige said to Rafe in the foyer as he came down the stairs.

"Well, they say the first step in curing a problem is admitting you have one," Rafe said. "Please, let me know how I can help you help yourself."

Paige ignored him. "They were talking all about this life path stuff," Paige said.

"Ah, a topic with which you are recently familiar," Rafe said.

"Do you tend to drive your students a little crazy?" Paige asked.

"I try to," Rafe admitted. "Life's just a little more fun with some insanity in it."

"Well, then my life is just a three-ring circus," Paige said. "Anyway, Gabrielle's like this totally obsessive-compulsive planner—"

"Yeah. Couldn't tell," Rafe said sarcastically.

"Anyway," Paige continued. "I think you were right earlier. I should just plan to focus on my magic for a while and worry about where my life will take me later."

"Doesn't take a house to fall on you," he said.

"That was a witch joke, wasn't it?" Paige said, smirking.

Piper was in the kitchen with Tyler making sure he ate something other than junk food before facing demons. The young Firestarter downed the last of his turkey sandwich and finished off a second glass of milk.

"Thanks," he said as he headed back toward his new friends in the living room.

"You're welcome," Piper replied. "Don't forget your sword."

"Why does he bring that sword everywhere?" asked Muriel, who had wandered into the kitchen also looking for a snack.

"I chose to leave the question unasked," Piper replied.

"Good call," Muriel said. "I think you'll make a great mother someday. Any plans?"

"Plans, yes," Piper replied. "Success, no."

"Keep at it," Muriel said with a gleam in her eye. "I'm sure something will happen soon enough."

Piper looked at her questioningly.

"Oh, no, I don't have some kind of Earth mother premonition just because I can manipulate the land," Muriel said with a laugh. "Just a feeling. I really can see you as a mom."

"I don't even have time to make stew," Piper said. "How am I going to take care of a child?"

"You'll find a way," Muriel said. "Women have been doing it since the beginning of time."

"Yeah, well, we'd better get going," Piper said. "Or we could be facing the end of time as we know it."

Chapter 18

The group left in two cars, uncomfortable with the risks involved in orbing back and forth to get everyone to Crystal Springs Reservoir; they weren't sure just how far the edict to "travel by earthly means" extended and didn't want to take their chances. Based on their earlier drives through the city, they gave themselves two hours to get to the Circle of Gaea, which they figured was more than enough time to get there and set up, taking into account any possible demon battling they may have to do.

Piper drove her SUV with Leo, Tyler, Darryl, and Muriel. At Muriel's suggestion, they sang car travel songs as they made their way slowly through the streets of town. Piper had assumed that it was Muriel's way of keeping Tyler calm, but, as he had called shotgun, she could see that he looked rather bored by it all. Muriel, on the

other hand, seemed to be having the time of her life squeezed between Leo and Darryl singing jaunty little tunes.

This day could not get any more surreal, Piper thought to herself as she sang along.

In spite of the storm and the darkened roads, the ride was fairly uneventful until a bright light appeared in front of them.

"What's that?" Tyler asked as he pointed through the windshield and up at the sky.

Paige was in the passenger seat of car number two, keeping an eye on Piper's car in front of them while Phoebe concentrated on keeping the car on the road. Debris from the storm was littering the streets, and lights were still out in sections of the city. Paige was having trouble following Piper's black SUV through the dark streets because the rain was still coming down heavily with high winds, and possibly even hail. It was hard to concentrate because she kept laughing over what was happening in the backseat.

Rafe apparently had given up on his flirtations with Paige when he realized it wasn't going anywhere and had moved on to Gabrielle, but was getting no response whatsoever. Paige assumed that "fun" wasn't anywhere in the woman's life plan either. She was also a bit annoyed that he had seemed to lose interest in her and move on to the woman ten years his senior. Not that age mattered any; Paige

was just looking for a reason to be annoyed.

It took Paige almost a half hour to realize that Rafe wasn't really interested in Gabrielle. He was just fooling around to see if he could get the woman to laugh. Paige figured it out when he caught her eye in the rearview mirror and made a face at her.

Paige also saw Gabrielle give her a strange look when she started laughing out loud for no apparent reason.

"You know, you could probably stop all this rain if you really wanted to," Rafe said. "I mean, it is only water."

"No, actually it's a combination of climatic factors occurring all around us and affecting the clouds thousands of feet in the air above, only then resulting in the water all around us," Gabrielle clarified.

"I knew you could be fun at parties," Rafe said. "Look at all the useless trivia you have at your disposal for small talk."

"Maybe you could at least hold back the rain between Piper and us. I can hardly see the SUV," Paige said. She played along with Rafe not just because it was fun, but because she could really use the help. It had gotten easier to navigate since there was hardly any traffic on the road out here, but it was totally dark and almost impossible to see Piper's taillights in the downpour.

"I don't really know how to do that," Gabrielle said, sounding like she was disappointed with her lack of knowledge.

"Besides, she should conserve her power," Phoebe said. "And Rafe, stop being an instigator."

"Sorry, Mom," he joked back.

Paige couldn't help but think that Phoebe was a little touchy since they were picking on *her* innocent. She was about to say something, but her attention was suddenly diverted.

"Look out!" Paige screamed as a giant fireball fell out of the sky—right toward them.

Piper swerved the SUV to the left as the fireball came crashing down in front of them. As she slammed on the breaks she knew that she was not going to stop in time to keep her from going into an embankment.

"Hold on!" she yelled as her right arm instinctively shot out to hold Tyler in his seat, even though he already had a seatbelt on.

In the milliseconds that followed, as they slid across the empty lanes of the road, Piper saw the ground in front of them suddenly buckle and rise. At first she thought it was another quake, but then realized that the road was rising steadily, creating an incline that slowed the car without smashing the front end. The SUV came to a stop about six inches from the edge of a steep drop off the side of the road.

"I'm getting the strangest sense of déjà vu," Darryl said, massaging his shoulder.

Before anyone could respond, a flash of headlights blew past them as Phoebe's lighter car

could not get the traction it needed. Instead of sliding off the road and down the embankment, it launched itself into the air, using the upturned road as a ramp.

"No!" Piper yelled.

It was as if the strength of her voice had developed a new magical power, because Phoebe's car slammed to a halt mid-air. Piper realized that Rafe must have used his powers as the car rocked from side to side, being buffeted by the winds.

Piper and the others jumped out of the SUV into the rainy night.

"Why aren't they coming down?" Tyler asked as the car started thrashing in mid-air.

"Rafe can't control it!" Muriel yelled.

"Everybody back!" Leo shouted over the increasing winds.

The group ran across the deserted road and watched in horror as the car flipped upside down and kept jumping wildly.

"Leo, do something," Piper shouted over the winds.

Her husband didn't have a chance to act as four sets of sparkly light appeared in front of them. A moment later Paige appeared with Phoebe, Rafe, and Gabrielle, holding hands.

"Let it down gently," Phoebe pleaded, still holding her keys which had been orbed right out of the ignition as she shut off the car in midair.

But Rafe was still not in control.

"I can't hold it!" he yelled.

Once again they felt the ground move. This time it was more violent than the earthquake, and everyone was knocked to the ground except Muriel. The fall jolted Rafe, and he lost control of the winds just as the ground rose up from the embankment. The car dropped about three feet as it crashed onto a plateau Muriel created by the side of the road.

Everyone sat in awe.

Gabrielle was the first to speak. All she could say was, "Wow."

"I don't suppose you could orb that back here?" Phoebe asked Paige since the plateau was about six feet above the road.

"I'm not done yet," Muriel said.

Once again the ground shook as it lowered the car until the plateau rested beside the ramp that Muriel had made into the road. She then gave a little bump and the car came rolling down. It looked a little battered from the winds, but the damage seemed minor, at least on the outside.

Once again the group fell silent.

"I swear I had nothing to do with that fireball," Tyler said.

"We know," Piper said, even though she had been a little concerned about that in the back of her mind.

"I think it means we have to start the 'earthly means' part of our travels," Leo suggested.

"Great," Paige said. "And in the pouring rain too."

"I think I can do something about that," Gabrielle said as she closed her eyes and started concentrating.

"Remember," Phoebe said, catching on to the plan. "Feel it, don't think."

Gabrielle opened her eyes, and when she did, the rain stopped. Well, it still kept coming down, but once it was about three feet over their heads—Darryl's head to be specific since he was the tallest—it divided like the Red Sea and came down around the group.

"We have to stay close," Gabrielle said. "I can't push the rain too far."

"You're doing fine," Muriel said.

"I could probably dry us all off," Tyler eagerly suggested. "All I have to do is focus my power."

"That's okay," Piper said. She figured that Tyler just wanted to feel like he was contributing, but she wasn't ready to put her clothes—and her body—at the mercy of his flames. "But we could use some light."

"Why don't you try a small fireball about three feet in front of us," Muriel suggested.

Tyler seemed to like the idea and let his emotions cast a little ball of fire to light their way. He tried to take the lead position, but Piper pulled him back into the mix, since it was a little dangerous for him to be front and center. She allowed her husband to take that position.

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Darryl totally understood Tyler's desire to feel useful as he brought up the rear of the little band of travelers walking along the side of the road. But at the same time he couldn't remember why he had argued with Sheila over getting an early release from the hospital. He also didn't understand why he wasn't at home right now having a romantic dinner with his wife.

Those thoughts continued to occupy his mind as they trudged along. He felt like he was trapped watching *Sesame Street* with his son as the song "One of These Things Is Not Like the Others" rolled over and over in his mind. Darryl reached inside his jacket to make sure he was armed, though for some odd reason he felt he would have been better protected with the sword.

The rain continued to pour down, though not on the eight-foot-by-four-foot stretch of space that moved along with them as they walked. Darryl had to admit that these Elementals were proving to be quite useful, just thinking how much more freedom he would have if he never had to hold an umbrella again for the rest of his life.

"Are we there yet?" Rafe asked. Darryl figured he was just beating Tyler to the punch.

"Beats me," Leo said. "The Elders didn't exactly point out the coordinates on a map."

"We'll know when we reach the trail that leads to the Circle of Gaea." Muriel said. "No need to worry."

But Darryl *was* worried. It was unlikely that Tempest would know the location for the ritual, since none of them had known it either. However, Darryl was getting used to how the demon mind worked and how they always seemed to have a surprise or two up their sleeves. That's exactly why he put himself on high alert when the rain stopped entirely.

He looked up and saw the clear moonlit sky above him, but that wasn't the surprising part. It was still a downpour only three feet behind him.

"Did I do that?" Gabrielle asked, almost in awe of herself.

"No, sweetie," Muriel said. "We've reached the trail."

Darryl saw that she was right. There was a trail cut into the trees on the side of the road. But he liked that path even less. On the road they had at least had some warning if something was about to attack them. The trees provided a frightening amount of cover even though the sky lit the path well enough that Tyler could put out his guiding fire.

"I don't like this," Darryl said, looking into the trees.

"I think we're all in agreement on that one," Paige said.

Muriel pushed a tiny button on her watch and the face glowed for a moment. "Well, like it or not, we've got to get moving. It's getting on midnight."

Darryl took out his gun and moved himself to the head of the group out of habit more than for any logical reason.

"Um, Darryl," Piper said gently. "Maybe one of us with powers should lead."

"I vote for the guy with the gun," Muriel said. "That's the one power the demons can't absorb and send back at us."

"Good point," Piper agreed. "Never mind. Darryl, lead the way."

Darryl stepped off the blacktop and onto the dirt path. He was much more comfortable moving between concrete buildings than tall trees, but he let his gun guide the way and felt a little more secure.

The path went up a slight, though long, incline, and Darryl kept his eyes moving in every direction as they made the ascent. The silence of the woods was much better to listen for noise in than the din of the city. At least they had that going for them. Everything seemed to be progressing smoothly when they saw a clearing ahead. Darryl hoped that it was the location of the Circle of Gaea.

"I think we're here," Darryl whispered as he let his attention slip for the briefest moment.

It was in that moment that a branch came swinging down on his hand, knocking his gun into the bushes.

Tempest's one remaining male demon was standing beside him.

Chapter 19

Darryl's shock wore off quickly as his instincts took over, and he came back slamming his fist in the demon's face.

"Stay back," Darryl warned as he saw the female demon appear in the center of the clearing. If the male demon had appeared like that it was no wonder he was able to get the drop on Darryl.

The woman raised her hand to show she was carrying a weapon.

"Gun!" Paige yelled, and she orbed the weapon to her a moment after it was fired. It was still hot when the barrel landed in her hand, forcing her to drop it on the ground.

The rest of the group dove for cover as the lone bullet crossed the clearing toward them. Piper pulled Tyler down with her as she froze the bullet before it hit Leo.

"Thanks, honey," Leo said as he grabbed the sword from Tyler and advanced on the male demon while Phoebe ran into the clearing and took on the female using her martial arts training.

"Darryl, keep the Elementals back!" Piper said as she went to join her husband.

Leo was well-practiced with the sword, but the demon was surprisingly agile considering his bulk, and able to keep away from the weapon with a series of tight moves. Piper considered blowing the demon up while his attention was diverted, but figured it was too risky.

Leo swung the sword, intending to decapitate the demon, but the guy dropped and swung his foot around, knocking Leo's legs out from beneath him and toppling him backward. Leo hit the ground hard and dropped the sword. The demon went for it.

Piper was on him in a flash. He may not have possessed any magic of his own, but he certainly had power as he flung her across the clearing.

"Piper, no!" Tyler yelled as he ducked past Darryl into the clearing. He had the presence of mind not to use his powers, but he was still rushing headlong into trouble.

"Tyler!" Darryl yelled as he gave chase.

The demon met Tyler halfway and clamped on to the kid. The power drain began immediately, and both bodies glowed red hot.

Darryl knew that he couldn't let the demon get Tyler's power so he did the only thing he

could. He took off his jacket, wrapped it around his fist, and gave the demon a blunted yet powerful hit across the chin. It knocked the demon off Tyler, but the heat from the power transfer was so intense that it set Darryl's jacket on fire, burning his hand. He managed to burn his free hand too, trying to remove the flaming clothes.

Leo took the opportunity to reclaim the sword and thrust it through the demon's chest.

At the same time, Phoebe was looking to be evenly matched with the female. Every kick Phoebe landed was blocked or countered. Even her power to levitate could not serve her as the demon clamped on to ensure that Phoebe couldn't get the upper hand.

Phoebe managed to shake the demon loose, but was distracted when Tyler ran into the clearing. The demon used that to her advantage as she grabbed Phoebe's leg and flung her, hard, to the ground.

Paige was right behind her sister with a vanquishing potion at the ready. Unfortunately, the demon didn't give her the chance to throw it as she attacked. Paige's fighting skills were as not as honed as her sister's, but she managed to land a few good blows before the demon knocked her aside, smashing the potion bottle in the process.

Once her partner was killed, the female wasted no time finishing the job he had started. She hurried across the clearing and grabbed on to Tyler, holding him like a shield in front of her.

She backed across the clearing keeping her eyes on everyone as she drained the boy.

"Tyler!" Piper yelled. She could see the pain in his eyes as his entire body glowed a reddish-orange.

"Stay back," the woman warned. "Or I'll drain him and then kill him."

"No," Piper said, throwing up her hands.

"Piper, wait," Leo said, grabbing on to her. "You can't blow her up so close to Tyler. And if you freeze time, we could all get stuck until she's done with him."

"Tough choice," the demon said as she focused on the rest of the Elementals who had stayed safely in the trees. "Don't worry. You're all next. I'll drain you one by one and give your gifts of power to Tempest."

"Piper!" Phoebe yelled as she moved next to her sister.

"I know," Piper replied as the three sisters realized the potential flaw in the demon's plan. "Paige."

"I'm on it," Paige orbed across the clearing to the Elementals so she could tell them the plan.

A moment later she and the Elementals entered the clearing.

"How kind of you to line up for me," the woman said as the glow started to fade from Tyler's eyes.

"Oh, they'll make it even more convenient," Piper said. "They'll give you all the powers at once."

The demon's eyes went wide.

"Now!" Paige yelled.

Muriel, Rafe, and Gabrielle grabbed hands and let loose with their powers, focusing on the demon holding Tyler. But the ground did not shake, the winds did not blow, and the rain did not fall. Instead, the three of them followed Muriel's unspoken guidance and hit the demon with their raw power, shooting beams of brown, sky blue, and aqua light from their bodies.

"No!" the demon screamed as she absorbed the full effects of the fire, water, air, and wind together. The intensity forced her to drop Tyler to the ground, but even with one less power entering her body it still proved too much. The demon exploded above Tyler, sending smoke up through the trees.

Silence fell over the clearing once again.

"That was *so* cool!" Tyler said as he picked himself up off the ground.

"That kid has a weird idea of fun," Paige said.

"Seemed pretty cool to me," Rafe agreed.

"Speak for yourself," Darryl said as he cringed over his burned hands.

"Here, let me," Leo said as he took Darryl's hands in his and worked his healing power.

"Couldn't do this in a more manly way, could you?" Darryl asked as they held hands. "Maybe over a couple beers."

"Next time," Leo said.

"After being healed twice in one day, I don't

want there *ever* to be a next time," Darryl said as they let go of each other. His hands had entirely healed over, leaving no burns or scars behind.

"Much as I hate interrupting a tender moment," Muriel joked as she checked her watch again, "we're getting nigh on midnight, as they say."

"As who says?" Tyler asked.

"It's a . . . thing," Piper replied, suspecting that she'd have to work on her question-answering abilities if she were to have her own child.

"This way," Phoebe said as she continued down the path on the other side of the clearing.

Everyone was even more on guard than before, knowing that Tempest must be near as well. Each member of the party hoped that they would be able to get through this without meeting up with the demon they only knew by name, but that seemed highly unlikely.

The odds were even less likely when they reached yet another clearing and found what appeared to be a man standing on a stone circle in the center.

"Hello," the demon Tempest said. "I've been waiting for you."

"Well, that's odd," Muriel said.

"What?" Piper asked.

"I thought he'd be taller," she replied.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere was too tense for anyone to laugh.

Muriel was right, though. Tempest was a little on the short side standing on ground level across

from the group. Not quite diminutive, but certainly not as imposing as his minions had been in person. Then again, his minions weren't very imposing anymore either.

"You know," Piper said as she stepped into the clearing, "considering your minions didn't have any powers of their own, I'm guessing you don't have any either."

"You'd be correct," Tempest said from his spot in the center of the stone.

Piper was surprised that he had answered her so readily.

"And without those minions to act as a conduit for the power," Phoebe added, "I'm guessing you have no way to drain the Elementals directly."

"That would be true as well," Tempest replied.

"So, then you're not really a threat anymore?" Paige added.

"Well, I could always kill you and force the Elementals to give me their power during the ritual," Tempest said.

"And how could you do that?" Piper took up the questioning again.

Paige used the fact her sister had the demon's attention to pull two potion bottles out of her bag. She handed one to Phoebe.

"I may not *own* their powers," Tempest said. "But as long as I stand in the Circle of Gaea, I can *control* them."

Paige and Phoebe each threw the vanquishing

potion, hoping one would connect, but neither bottle made it as far as the demon. They both exploded in flames in midair—several feet before they reached Tempest.

Tyler doubled over in pain as he lost control of his power.

"You see," the demon said, "it's nearly midnight and I'm only moments away from controlling their powers, and the weather, for all time."

"Like we don't have a backup plan," Phoebe said as she closed the gap between her and her sisters.

"What?" Tempest asked in a condescending tone. "A spell? I doubt it will work if it can't be heard."

With a blink of his eyes, Tempest called up hurricane-force winds that knocked Tyler and Gabrielle to the ground. Rafe fell a moment later, but not from the wind. He was in serious pain from Tempest taking control of his power.

The Charmed Ones could barely keep their footing as they clasped hands and started their chant. It was no use. The winds reached in and carried the words right out of their mouths and out of the clearing.

Leo reached for Tyler's sword, but a flash of lightning came out of the cloudless sky, sending him and the metal sword flying.

Piper moved to blow up the demon, figuring that he couldn't absorb her power either. But Tempest countered by shaking the ground and

sending the Charmed Ones to their knees and Muriel to the ground as he stole her control of the earth.

Surprisingly, it was Gabrielle who tried to beat Tempest to the punch by willing a flood of water out of the nearby reservoir, but Tempest effortlessly sent it back at her, knocking her to the ground.

While Tempest's focus was split attempting to control the four powers at once, the Charmed Ones locked hands again and tried to work their spell once more. But the combination of wind carrying their words and the water flooding their mouths stopped them.

Tempest was so consumed with drowning the witches on dry land that he didn't notice the mortal sneaking up on him until Darryl launched himself at the demon and pulled him off the Circle of Gaea.

As Darryl landed on the grass with the demon he yelled to the Charmed Ones, "Now!"

Piper, Phoebe, and Paige stood and clasped hands, reciting the spell they had prepared earlier.

By the Water and the Air,
By the Earth and the Fire,
By the powers that we bear,
Tempest's life, now expire.

Darryl rolled off the demon as his body glowed a bright aqua, then shifted slightly to

sky blue, then deepened to brown, and finally turned to orange before Tempest exploded in front of them.

Once again everyone was speechless as they took in the fact that they were finally free of the demons that had been chasing them all day. Muriel checked her watch.

"We're down to minutes," she announced as everyone moved toward the stone circle.

Piper helped Leo up as he regained consciousness from his near electrocution and joined the group as they examined the stone circle.

It was a simple platform made of what looked to be granite. Now that Tempest had been removed, they could see the Circle of Gaea had a five-pointed star carved into it, forming a pentagram.

"We each have to take a point," Muriel instructed, making sure that they each had their symbolic item of sword, wand, chalice, and coin. "Rafe takes the upper left and Gabrielle gets the lower left. Tyler, honey, you're on the right side with me. Take the lower point, and I'm right here."

They all did as instructed, taking their positions on the star.

"What about the top point?" Tyler asked.

"Good question," Muriel said. "That is the point reserved for the Spirit Elemental."

"Wait a minute," Paige said. "What Spirit Elemental?"

"The most powerful Elemental there is," Muriel said. "It is the one that holds all the other elements together: the *Human* Spirit."

"What are you talking about?" Piper asked as she checked her own watch to see there were only two minutes to midnight. "You didn't say anything about finding a Human Spirit."

"Didn't have to," Muriel said. "You've had a very powerful one with you all day. The only full human in the group . . . Darryl, will you please take your spot on the circle?"

Chapter 20

"Whoa, wait a minute," Darryl said, physically backing away from the circle. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're the only one of us that doesn't have some kind of power suppressing the full force of your human spirit," Muriel said simply. "Really, we don't have time to discuss this. Time is ticking." She pointed to the topmost point of the star.

Darryl's mind was buzzing. *This doesn't make any sense at all,* he thought. *I'm not supposed to be part of this ritual. I'm only here because . . . why* am *I here again?*

"All you need to do is stand here and take part in the ritual," Muriel said. "Really, it's not that complicated."

Oh, yes it is, said the little voice in his head. *What about your "know nothing, see nothing" philosophy?*

"Muriel, why didn't it say anything about a Spirit Elemental in Christopher's files?" Piper asked, though Darryl suspected she was just stalling to give him time to accept the fact that the ritual apparently hinged on him.

"It's not the Firestarter's responsibility to find the Spirit Elemental," Muriel explained. "The Spirit is the one who finds the Firestarter."

Well, technically, my job was *to find the Firestarter,* Darryl thought. *And I managed to do that quickly enough.*

He looked down at the sword, chalice, wand, and coins that were lying at the feet of their respective Elementals.

"But I don't have a symbol of my power," Darryl said, this time providing his own stalling.

"Of course you do," Muriel said as she stepped off the stone and moved toward Darryl. "Your symbol is heart." She gently guided him into his position. "Now let's get this puppy started."

Darryl watched the Charmed Ones and their Whitelighter step away from the circle to give the Elementals space to perform the ritual. He wasn't sure what he had to do since he had missed that part of the briefing—what with being near death. Darryl just followed along as the Elementals joined hands by taking Gabrielle's on his left and Tyler's on his right.

"Tyler," Muriel said.

"Now?" Tyler asked.

She smiled and gave him a nod.

Tyler closed his eyes and a fire erupted in the middle of the circle—contained, but sending flames high into the air that obviously matched Tyler's excitement level. The flames calmed down once Tyler did as well.

"Repeat after me," Muriel said in the most seriously calm voice she had used all day. "Guardians of the North, the West, the South, the East . . ."

"Guardians of the North, the West, the South, the East . . ."

". . . Join together in the spirit of this circle . . ."

". . . Join together in the spirit of this circle . . ."

". . . And bring about peace . . ."

"And bring about peace . . . Calm the winds, hold back the rains, subdue the fire, and let Earth rest. On this Night of Aeolus, in this the Circle of Gaea, we implore you to take back your power by using our strength."

Darryl didn't realize that they'd stopped repeating what Muriel said and were actually speaking as one until after the verbal part of the ritual had ended. It was an odd sensation to know he had just recited a speech he had never heard before. Somehow it had seemed so natural, just as the energy flowing through the circle from Tyler to him and then to Gabrielle felt right.

The energy shifted in color as it traveled round three times then shot out from each of the Elementals into the flame in the center. The fire

danced in front of them, then exploded up to the sky in a brilliant burst.

Once again the clearing was lit solely by moonlight.

"The Earth is at peace," Muriel said.

"Really?" Rafe asked. "Doesn't feel any different."

The clearing was exactly the same as it had been before the ritual. The only difference that Darryl noticed was a gentle breeze replacing the eerie stillness that had been there before.

"Oh, but it is," Muriel said calmly, then broke her serious demeanor and looked at Tyler. "Race you back to the car."

The boy apparently considered taking off, but stopped himself when he realized the woman was making a joke.

Paige considered the day's events as the group made their way back on the path to the road. She understood exactly what Tyler, Rafe, Gabrielle, and even Darryl were going through emotionally after finding out that they each had an unexpected gift that they could use to do such important work.

As she and the group came out of the woods, the first thing they noticed was that the sky was just as clear as it had been above the Circle of Gaea and the wind just as gentle.

"Wow," said Tyler. After all they'd been through it was pretty much all anyone could say.

Silently, they continued to the cars. Their trek was much faster without having to fight against the weather, worry about demons, or keep to the small patch of dry area that Gabrielle had created for them earlier.

Paige wouldn't have been surprised at all to see a small family of deer come out from the trees to walk with them. The moment seemed just so naturally perfect. However, no fauna were there to meet them when they reached the cars.

"Keep your fingers crossed," Phoebe said as she started the engine.

Paige, Rafe, and Gabrielle cheered as the engine turned over. Since the SUV was actually facing the passenger side of the car, Paige gave Piper the "thumbs up," and Phoebe and Piper then pointed both their vehicles in the right direction.

This time it was much easier to follow Piper's taillights up the road. Paige didn't even have to navigate for Phoebe. The car ride was mostly silent as everyone was exhausted from the day, both physically and emotionally.

Since the passengers in both cars had already said their good-byes, Phoebe split off from Piper to take Rafe back to his car. It was still parked at the zoo in the same spot it had been when Paige had decided it would be faster to orb home.

Paige walked him to his car after Rafe said his good-byes to Phoebe and Gabrielle. She figured that her sister wanted to give them some time

alone since she had pulled in several spots away from the truck.

"Phoebe's not too big with the subtle," Rafe said as they took the short stroll to the truck he had borrowed.

"Not so much," Paige agreed. "Look, I—"

"Hey, I get it," Rafe interrupted. "Believe me, I totally understand needing some time for yourself."

"It's not permanent," Paige said. "I just want to figure out what I'm doing with my work and my magic . . . and ultimately the rest of my life."

"And why would you want to get involved with a guy who has well over two dozen kids in various parts of the city?" Rafe asked.

Paige's eyes nearly bugged out.

"Schoolteacher . . . remember?" he said, beaming a smile at her.

"It's been a long day," Paige said, shaking her head.

"Well . . . good-bye," Rafe said as they did the awkward "handshake or kiss" dance.

Mid-step, Paige noticed a strange paw print on the hood of Rafe's car, "What do you think that is?"

"Either a monkey or a duck-billed platypus," Rafe said. "I'm sure a few of the animals took the quake as their chance to escape."

"I think duck-billed platypuses . . . or platypi?" Paige wondered. "They have webbed feet."

"I know," Rafe said. "I just wanted to hear

you say platypi." He leaned in, giving her a soft kiss on the cheek.

Once Paige got back in the car, it was all Phoebe could do not to ask her sister what was going on with the cute Elemental. She was definitely picking up a vibe, but Paige just didn't seem like she was interested in pursuing it right now.

She exited the parking lot and headed for the hospital where Gabrielle had insisted on being taken.

"You sure you don't want to go home and rest?" Phoebe asked.

"I'm just getting my second wind," Gabrielle said.

"Actually, he just left," Paige said with a groan. "I'm sorry. I just said that out loud, didn't I?"

The three women shared a laugh over the lame pun.

"So, now that you've accepted this power," Phoebe said, readdressing the subject they had discussed earlier, "how does that fit into your plan?"

Gabrielle thought over the question. "I don't know yet," she admitted. "And I have to say, I'm a little excited. It's the first time since I was a teenager that I didn't have every aspect of my life plotted out. I feel a little more free than I did this morning."

"If you really felt free, you'd go home and get some rest since you clocked out earlier," Phoebe noted.

"One step at a time, Phoebe," Gabrielle replied. "One step at a time."

The streets were fairly clear so late at night. Now that the storm had subsided, the damage from the quake didn't seem as bad as it had when the heavy winds were blowing debris around. The city had even managed to get most of the lights back on between the zoo and the hospital, which were not all that close to each other.

"Here we are," Phoebe said as she pulled in by the emergency room entrance.

"Thanks," Gabrielle said as she got out of the car. "For everything."

"You did the hard part," Paige said with a wave.

"Still, I feel that somehow I need to thank you," Gabrielle said. "For getting me to accept who I am."

"Forget about it," Paige said. "We do this kind of thing every day."

"Not so fast," Phoebe said as she looked up at the former lawyer from the driver's seat. "Gabrielle, how are you with contracts?"

Piper couldn't help but be excited as she and Darryl followed Tyler up the walk to his house. The door was locked so he started ringing the bell frantically and banging on the door. The noise echoed through the quiet neighborhood, but Piper didn't stop him. It was nice to see him so quick to return to his normal life.

She had given Tyler another drink of the

binding potion on the ride back from Crystal Springs Reservoir. Tyler would have preferred her to use a spell, but that only worked on the unbinding. They had been forced to do it with the old-fashioned—and less tasty—method.

The door swung open and both Stephen and Maria appeared in the doorway. Even though it was close to one in the morning, they were both wide awake, which didn't surprise Piper in the least. She could imagine there wasn't much sleeping going on while Tyler was missing. They were on their son in seconds, smothering him in hugs and kisses along with squeals of joy. Paige had certainly found the perfect couple to raise him.

Piper looked back to see Leo and Muriel watching from the car. She wished that the reunion could end on the happy note of parents and child back together, but once the initial joy wore off and Stephen invited her and Darryl into the house, she knew the questions would begin.

"Where did you find him?" Stephen asked as they walked into the living room. Maria wouldn't let go of her son.

"It's a long story," Piper said, hoping that would suffice but knowing it wouldn't.

"It had to do with his last foster situation, like I said," Darryl added, working the lie they had settled on in the car. "And that missing couple."

"But everything's okay now," Piper insisted.

"Is he safe now?" Maria asked. "Are those people going to come back?"

"They're entirely out of the picture," Darryl said. "Tyler will be fine."

Piper couldn't help but wonder if that was true. She had thought Tyler was safe the last time she had bound his powers. It was all the more reason she would have to look in on him from time to time.

"What happened?" Stephen asked, apparently wanting more of an explanation.

"Not now, Stephen," Maria said, hugging her son. "In the morning. Tyler looks exhausted.

Thanks for the save, Piper thought.

"We should get going," Darryl said. "Let you have your reunion and get Tyler to bed."

Tyler broke from his mom and gave Piper a big good-bye hug that really tugged at those maternal urges.

"Thanks for everything, Piper," he said as he let go. "You too, Darryl." He took the officer's hand and gave him a very manly shake.

"You were pretty impressive there yourself," Darryl said. "Don't forget, I'm going to need a babysitter sometime. Maybe next weekend when I have to make up for missing a night out with my wife."

Piper gave both the parents a hug good-bye, while Darryl kept it to a more professional handshake. They both took a deep breath as the front door closed behind them and they walked to the SUV.

"So, what exactly are you going to write in

the report?" Piper asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

"I'll stick to the story we created," Darryl said. "Keep to the basics. As long as the good guys keep winning, the chief is content enough."

"And Agent Harkins?" Piper asked.

"He's another good one," Darryl said. "He'll ask the tough questions, but in the end I'm sure he'll go with the story."

"Darryl," Piper said as she stopped before they reached the car. "I don't know how many more times I'm going to do this, but thank you. Thank you for everything you do for us. We really couldn't fulfill this whole destiny thing without you."

She wrapped Darryl in a tight embrace.

"Let's get you home," she said as she continued to the SUV to find Leo and Muriel waiting for them on the sidewalk.

"I'm guessing it went well inside?" Leo asked.

"Pretty much," Piper said, giving her husband a hug.

"We've agreed that Leo's going to pop me home," Muriel said with an excited look on her face. "I've really wanted to try that orbing thing!"

Piper laughed. The sixty-seven-year-old woman looked even younger than Tyler as she waited to be orbed.

"I don't know if I should trust you alone with my husband," Piper said.

"Hey, you were the one just hugging the big guy here," Muriel said, giving Darryl a playful slap on the back.

"I guess it will be okay," Piper said, acting like she was skeptical over the whole idea.

Leo and Darryl kindly stepped aside so the two women could say a proper good-bye.

"Thanks for all the help, kiddo," Muriel said. "The little Firestarter couldn't have done it without you."

"I had a lot of help," Piper reminded her.

"Still, you were the one in charge," Muriel said. "Trust me. In my life I've overseen hundreds, if not thousands of employees. You made that look downright simple compared to everything you handled today."

"Maybe I should tackle that stew again," Piper joked. "We never had dinner."

"Maybe you should go romance that hunky husband of yours," Muriel said with a wink. "The stew can wait."

Piper liked that idea better than standing over a stew pot again. There would be time for that later.

They exchanged good-byes and Piper moved over with Darryl to watch Leo and Muriel orb away. They both stood in silence a moment longer, still absorbing all that had happened throughout the day.

"Let's get you home," Piper finally said.

Epilogue

Darryl waved good-bye to Piper as she drove off into the night. It was after one, and all the lights in the house were off. He wasn't sure if that was because of the earthquake or not since Sheila usually left the living room light on for him when he was working late, and the familiar glow was not coming through the window.

Darryl was careful not to make any noise when he opened the front door so he wouldn't wake his wife. They had left things a little tense at the hospital, and he would have preferred to have the pending conversation in the morning, or never actually have it at all.

As soon as the door was open a crack, he heard the strange sound of a saxophone echoing through the house. His favorite jazz CD was on, and it seemed to be coming from the dining room. He followed the smooth sounds and the

faint glow that turned out to be candlelight.

Two white taper candles were lit on either side of the table. Sheila's favorite table linens and the fine china and crystal had been laid out under the glow of the candles. Darryl was glad to see that none of it had been damaged in the earthquake.

"Welcome home," Sheila said as she came in from the kitchen wearing her black silk robe and carrying a covered tray. She walked over to the table, put down the tray, and turned to give her husband a kiss.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"I realize your day was crazy," she replied. "But don't tell me you forgot all about our romantic dinner."

In that moment, Darryl loved his wife more than he thought possible.

"Voilà," she said as she removed the cover from the tray to reveal a pair of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. "I didn't want to use the gas oven in case another aftershock hit."

Darryl knew that was no longer a concern, but he didn't care. They could have a romantic meal over a couple of Pez candies. He took his wife in his arms again and slowly swayed to the music.

"I'm sorry," he said as they danced. "I—"

"Not tonight," Sheila replied. "I know your life is crazy. I don't want to make it any crazier."

"Thank you," he said.

"But we *will* talk about this someday," she said.

"Yes," he said, focusing on the music and his moves. "Someday."

The saxophone continued to play as they swayed together in perfect unison. For the second time since midnight, Darryl knew that he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

About the Author

Paul Ruditis has written and contributed to various books based on such notable TV shows as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer; Sabrina, The Teenage Witch; The West Wing; Star Trek: Voyager;* and *Enterprise.* He lives in Burbank, California.

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Alien abduction fever has gripped San Francisco. People everywhere are reporting loved ones missing . . . only to have them show up at home with no recollection of having been gone. The Charmed Ones can't help but become involved, especially when Phoebe receives a letter to her advice column from a woman who's convinced her sister was "taken." The victim says she was just out, but since she's returned, she's developed an almost demonic devotion to a new workout program.

The workout program in question, created by Meg Winship, has become incredibly popular in the Bay Area. Even Piper, after seeing an informercial, suddenly finds herself jogging to the "Winship Way." Luckily there's a rally being held in San Francisco in the next few days. Meg Winship herself will appear to further inspire and thank her new disciples. If there's something supernatural involved, as the sisters suspect, the fitness fiesta is their best bet to figure out who—or what—is in charge of the chaos.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

by Jeff Mariotte
Available September 2004
From Simon Spotlight Entertainment

THE BREWING STORM

Earth, air, fire, water—
A child must bring them all together.
Calm the shaking, quell the slaughter
Tonight's the night—it's now or never.

Despite wacky weather threatening the San Francisco area, life for the Charmed Ones is as normal as ever. Normal, that is, until eleven-year-old Tyler Michaels shows up at their door. Tyler, a Firestarter, is on the run from demons. Though the Halliwell sisters have dealt with Tyler before, a glance at the Book of Shadows turns up new, unexpected information about the boy . . . and the forces for which his magic can be harnessed.

Once a century the planets align in such a way that the tides shift and the climate changes, causing unpredictable weather and earthquakes. With the world out of balance the Firestarter is charged with gathering the other Elementals on the Night of Aeolus to perform a sacred ritual. Without this ritual the weather will eventually tear the world apart. But the demons chasing Tyler want to divert the Elemental power and channel it for a dark evil. The Charmed Ones must prevent this fr[illegible]awakening at all costs—but the Night of Aeolus is alread[illegible]

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